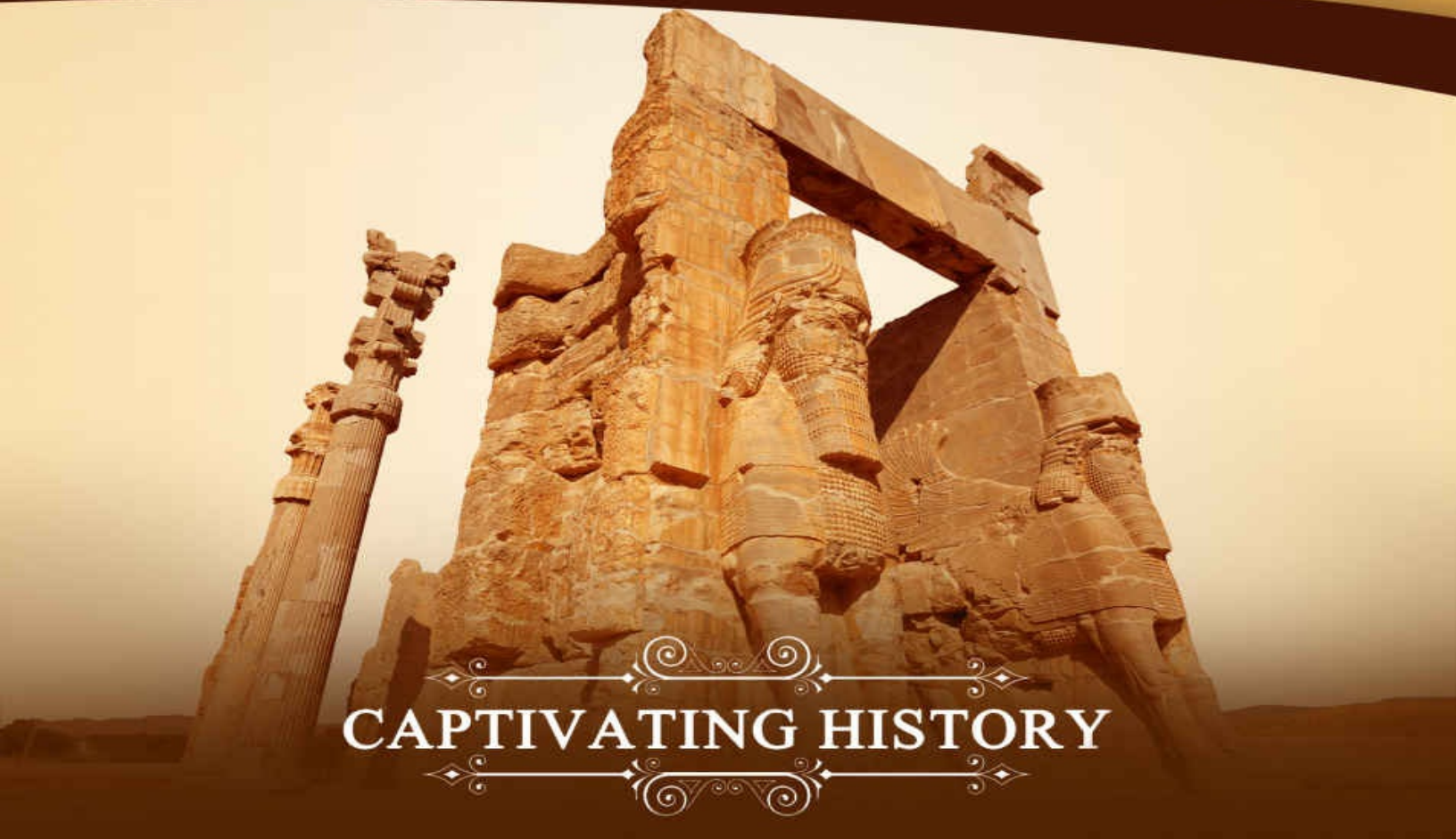
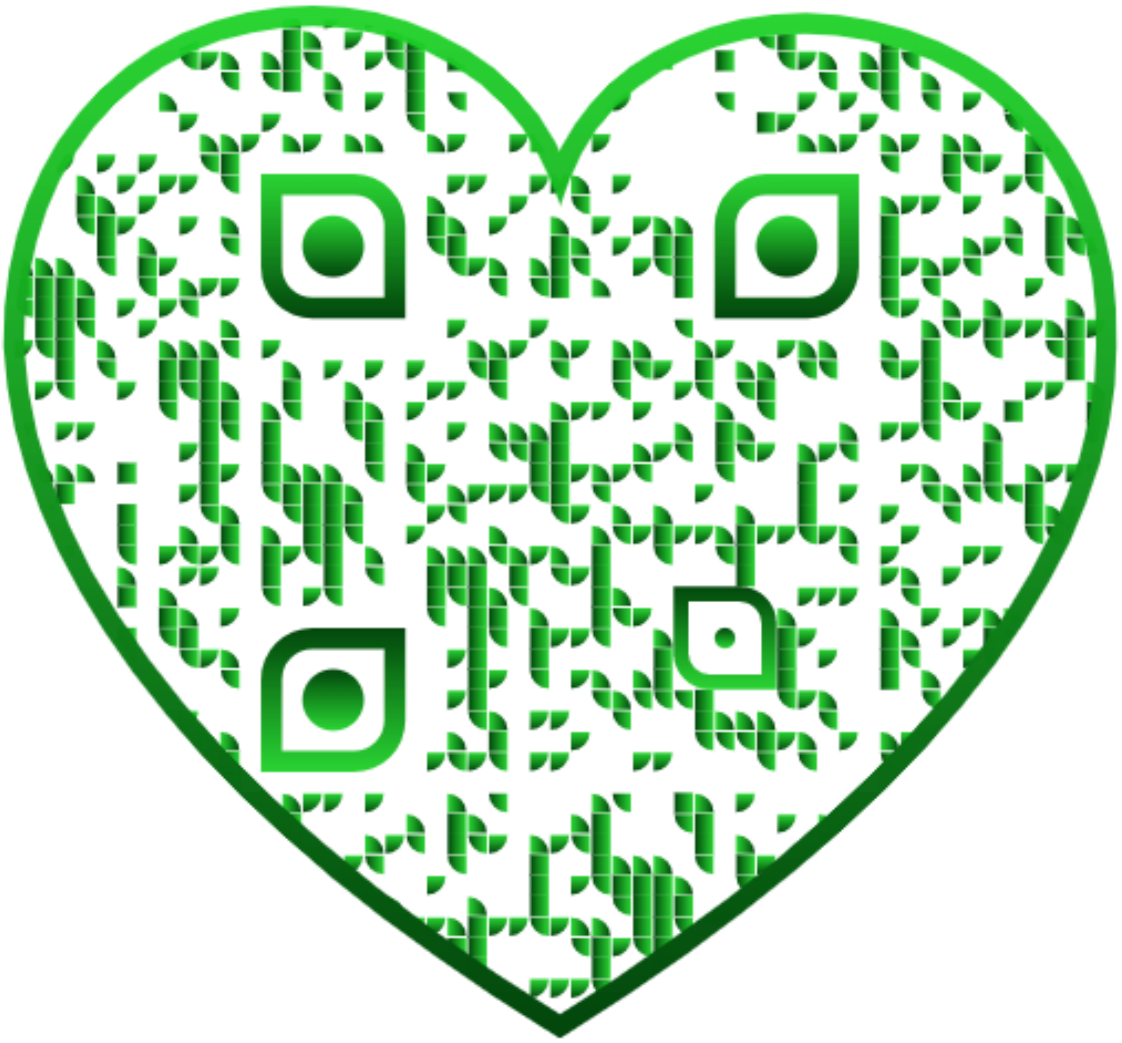
ANCIENT IRAN

A CAPTIVATING GUIDE TO PERSIA, FROM THE ELAMITES THROUGH THE MEDIANS, ACHAEMENIDS, SELEUCID EMPIRE, PARTHIA, AND SASANIAN DYNASTY TO THE ARAB CONQUEST



CAPTIVATING HISTORY



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A Captivating Guide to Persia, from the Elamites through the Medians, Achaemenids, Seleucid Empire, Parthia, and Sasanian Dynasty to the Arab Conquest

Table of Contents

Introduction
PART ONE: Early Iran (3500 BCE-550 BCE)
Chapter 1-The Foundation of Ancient Iran
Chapter 2-The Geographical and Politico-Cultural Context of Ancient Iran
Chapter 3-Proto & Old Elamite Periods (3500-1500 BCE)
Chapter 4-Middle & Neo-Elamite Periods (1500-540 BCE)
Chapter 5-The Median Empire
PART TWO: The Birth of a New Persia (550 BCE-225 CE)
Chapter 6-Cyrus the Great and His Many Conquests
Chapter 7-The Achaemenid Empire (550-330 BCE)
Chapter 8 – The Seleucid Empire of Ancient Iran
Chapter 9-The Parthian Empire (247 BCE-224 CE)
PART THREE: An Era of Change (225 CE-650 CE)
Chapter 10-Sasanian Empire: The Last Imperial Dynasty
Chapter 11-The Arab Conquest and Islamization: Legacy and Roots in Persian Culture
PART FOUR: Ancient Iran: A Thematic Approach
Chapter 12-Art, Culture, and Archaeology
Chapter 13-Religion and Myths
Chapter 14-Agriculture and Trade
Conclusion
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Bibliography
Image References

Introduction

Ancient Iran (Persia) is considered one of the cradles of civilization. Along with its close neighbor, ancient Iraq or Mesopotamia, these regions were often considered a single geo-political region throughout the Persian Empires. Spanning four millennia from 3500 BCE to 650 CE, the ancient dynasties of Iran were arguably the most culturally influential the world has ever known. Their royal courts birthed the foundations of modern-day art, architecture, governance, and law, and Persian politics and elements of warfare were emulated for millennia by friends and foes alike.

Iran's origins are obscure, but some of the oldest in the world, and the dynasties of kings that lived before the mighty empires arose laid the foundation for greatness. The first royal lineages came from deep within the Zagros Mountains of Western Iran. Spreading out to the greater Zagros, or Elam, ancient Iran grew to fill the plains to the west abutting Mesopotamia and melded with the Aryan nomads across the Iranian Plateau to the east.

Empires grew from the expansive plains, beginning with Media in the 7th century BCE, and were followed by the Achaemenids a hundred years later. The Achaemenids were considered the first true Iranian Empire and dominated half of the ancient world of Eurasia for two centuries from the mid-6th century BCE. The Macedonian infiltration led by Alexander the Great opened the Hellenistic era of ancient Iran from 330 BCE, after which the Greeks continued to rule Persian lands for a century under the Seleucid Empire that followed the death of Alexander.

Two more Iranian Empires succeeded the Seleucids, both almost half a millennium in duration. The Parthian Empire dominated Iran from the removal of the Seleucids in 247 BCE and lasted for almost 250 years into the Common Era. The Sasanian Empire that governed next arose from the Parthians and ruled Persia until the Arab invasion in the 7th century. The Islamic overthrow of the Sassanids took just two decades and had irretrievably altered Iran by 651 CE.

Although this was the quickest spread of a monotheistic religion during Iran's ancient history, it took a further 400 years for Islam to become entrenched across Iranian lands. Despite the waves of change that Persia experienced from its origins to the 7th century of the Common Era, the ancient Iranian culture held firm. This unique culture continues to serve as the foundation of modern Iran through a national identity that was set in motion more than five

thousand years ago.

PART ONE: Early Iran (3500 BCE-550 BCE)

Chapter 1-The Foundation of Ancient Iran

The boundary of modern-day Iran is a limited geographical perspective of a civilization that can date its history back to 100,000 years before the Common Era. Ancient Iran is better described as a series of civilizations that expanded beyond the country's current political boundaries. As the Iranian empires rose and fell between 3,500 BCE and the advent of Islam in the 7th century CE, the boundaries of these civilizations changed to include large swathes of Europe, the Middle East, and Western Asia. At its height, ancient Iran stretched west to include parts of Greece, southwest into Egypt, south onto the Arabian Peninsula, southeast onto the Indian subcontinent, east to include Afghanistan, northeast across Uzbekistan, and north into Eastern Europe as far as Georgia.

Ancient Iran was most powerful during the first Persian Empire, or the Achaemenid Empire, from approximately the 6th to the 4th century BCE. During this time, the empire's influence dominated the emerging classical region of Macedonia, or Greece. The scholars, soldiers, and tradesmen who moved along the highway that connected Greece to Iran referred to the Iranian Kingdom as Persia. Although it became widespread and is still used today, this naming was an inaccurate description of the region and wasn't employed by the ancient people of Iran themselves.

In reality, Persia was a dominant region of Iran north of the modern-day Persian Gulf, known in ancient times as the Lower Sea. This region of Iran was called Persis (or Parsus, Pers, Pars, Parsa, Parsi, or Fārs) and remains a province of Iran. Referred to during its height as Parsa, the region included the most powerful imperial kingdom the world had ever known. Persis comprised the imperial capital of Persepolis, which was the most important and wealthiest city across Europe and Western Asia until its conquest by the Grecian conqueror Alexander the Great in 330 BCE.[1] The European interlopers to Iran used the name Persia to refer to the entire expanse of ancient Iran rather than the more accurate geographic region around its capital.

[1] Approximate extent of the "Persian Empire," or the greatest extent of ancient Iran.

The name Iran derives from the most ancient settlers to the area, who predated the powerful kingdoms of the 6th to the 3rd centuries BCE. Iran is a reference to the Aryan people who migrated onto the Iranian Plateau sometime between the second and first millennium BCE. The Aryans, or Airya, were originally known as Airyana Vaeja or Arya Varta, named after their original mountain home. Over time, the term Airyana Vaeja became Airan-Vej and then Eran-Vej, and finally was abbreviated down to Eran or Airan. Eventually, the adopted homeland of these Aryan people was known as Iran. The exact time Iran became its common name is unknown, but it seems to have accompanied or postdated the Islamic era. At a global level, Iran was referred to as Persia until approximately the start of the Second World War in the mid-20th century. (The terms Iran, Persia, Greater Iran, the Iranian Empire, and the Persian Empire will be used interchangeably throughout the book to refer to the changing extent of the ancient Iranian dominion.)

The Aryans were a large group of indigenous Indo-Iranians identified for their preponderance of freedom from slavery and their way of life and religious beliefs. Two Indo-Iranian religions specifically mention the Aryan people—Zoroastrianism and Hinduism. (Indo-Iranian refers to the geographical areas of Greater Iran and the Indian subcontinent.) The Zoroastrian Avesta is the main collection of religious works associated with the religion and dates from approximately the 3rd to the 7th century of the Common Era. The Hindu Vedas were a set of four canonical texts of ancient Hinduism and are considered the oldest records of Hindu scriptural literature.

One of the texts, the Rig-Veda, dating from approximately 1500-1200 BCE, is the oldest Veda and specifically refers to the Aryan people. The Avesta often referenced the Aryan people, and the connection between the Aryans and Zoroastrianism was central to the religion. Since it was the Aryan people who founded most of Iran, Zoroastrianism was a religion that wove its way through the history of its ancient kingdoms and is one of the world's oldest organized monotheistic religions.

The scriptures of the Avesta and the Vedas refer to the original homeland of the Aryan people as a mysterious, mountainous region most likely to be Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan). Religious legends tell that these original people of the central Asian highlands split into two groups and migrated to India and Iran. The causes for this mass migration are said to be due to an irreparable division in religious ideologies, coupled with a changing climate and land degradation, forcing a mass migration south.[2]

Greater Iran is the broader Iranian boundary where Iranian culture and languages are most prevalent. Although Greater Iran includes a smaller geographical boundary than the area referred to as ancient Persia, it gives a good indication of the historical influence of the Iranian kingdoms over time. Greater Iran is a modern concept and includes parts of Western, Central, and South Asia—specifically the Iranian Plateau and its surrounding plains. The Iranian Plateau is a region surrounded by mountains and water bodies that naturally became a critically strategic area of the ancient world. Encircled by the Zagros Mountains to the west (on the border with modern-day Iraq), the Alborz Mountains to the north below the Caspian Sea, the Persian Gulf to the south, and the Indian subcontinent to the east, as well as other mountains and water bodies, Greater Iran's extent has been determined by geography.

As the Iranian kingdoms spread and settled across the plateau, their natural positioning at the intersection of the Western, Eastern, and Arabian cultures secured their geopolitical power for millennia. Ancient Iran was central to the Silk Road trade route that flourished from the 2nd millennium BCE to the 18th century CE and connected China in the east to Southern Europe and North Africa in the west. From the 6th to the 4th century BCE, the section of the Silk Road between Iran and Turkey was known as the Persian Royal Road since it was maintained by the ruling Achaemenid Empire, which used it to convey royal communications and decrees.

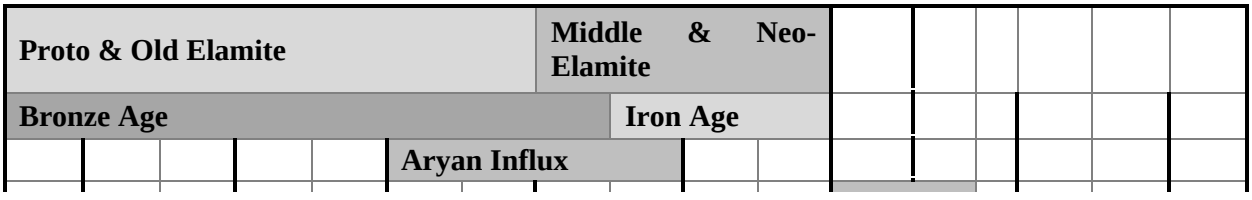
According to a book of the Zoroastrian Avesta, the *Vendidad*, the Aryan

people established sixteen settlements along the trade routes of the Iranian Plateau and Upper Indus River Valley (northwestern extremity of the Indian subcontinent). These settlements did not yet include the all-powerful southwestern Iranian region destined to become Persis. Eventually, 240 regional tribes sharing common languages, cultures, and religions stretched across the width of most of Greater Iran and up to the Taklamakan Desert of northwestern China; this area was broadly referred to as Aryana.

Before the prevalence of Europeans, more regional kingdoms such as the Assyrians (a Mesopotamian Kingdom of 2500 to 600 BCE) left inscriptions referring to the conquest of parts of Parsua/Parsumash/Parsamash or Parsuash. Parsua is believed to have been a precursor to Persis located along the Zagros Mountains, bordering the kingdom of Elam. The Zagros Mountains are an extensive chain of highlands that form a natural border between modern-day northwestern Iran, southeastern Turkey, and northeastern Iraq—spanning the entire length of the western and southwestern Iranian Plateau.

Elam was an ancient region at the far west-southwestern extremity of ancient Iran adjacent to the Persian Gulf and south of the river mouth of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. It included the historical capital of Susa (present-day Shush) and was most prevalent between approximately 3200 and 539 BCE. The Elam civilization was one of the major settlements of the ancient Near East and predated the overarching Iranian empires that eventually grew to encompass the Iranian Plateau. Elam was the southern-most locale of the ancient Fertile Crescent considered to be one of the cradles of civilization.[3]

Although Elam played a crucial role in the Iranian empires that succeeded it, it is likely that the Aryan people, who eventually migrated south to surround Elam and create what became known as the Persian Empire, had a separate ancestry. Historical records regarding the settlement of Iran are neither clear nor in agreement, but the large region to the southeast of Elam that became Persis is thought to have developed around the Parsa/Parsi people, one of the Aryan tribes that later moved south onto the Iranian Plateau from Central Asia.[4]



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Chapter 2-The Geographical and Politico-Cultural Context of Ancient Iran

The extent of the Persian Empire was destined to be defined by geographical features. To the southwest, the significant river basin and tributaries of the Tigris-Euphrates River system drained the eastern half of the Fertile Crescent from eastern Turkey in the north to the Persian Gulf in the south. The civilizations that grew along this drainage basin are considered the oldest examples of organized human settlements in history and predated the Aryan migration onto the Iranian Plateau by an estimated eight millennia.

To the south, the ocean prevented any southward expansion of Iran. The enclosed Lower Sea into which the Tigris-Euphrates emptied led east into the ancient Erythraean Sea—or the modern-day Arabian Sea. Over land, contemporary Pakistan was included within the Iranian Empire, but any expansion further southeast was prevented by the Indus River Valley of the Indo-Gangetic Plain. Also known as the North Indian River Plain, the Indo-Gangetic Plain was the series of riverine systems and plains stretching across the north of modern-day India that defined the Indian subcontinent. The Indus River and its mighty basin and alluvial plains ran southwest across the North Indian River Plain to empty into the Arabian Sea. The Indus Valley was the most westerly barrier to large influxes of people onto the Indian Subcontinent and kept India largely safe from conquering empires over its long and complex history.

The Indo-Gangetic Plain was bound to the north by the extensive and impenetrable stretch of the Himalayan Mountain range that formed a natural border between Western Asia and Eastern Asia, specifically China, preventing ancient Iran from spreading eastward. The section of mountain range extending into Afghanistan to form a border with Pakistan specifically blocked east-northeastern spread—the Hindu Kush Himalaya Region (HKH). To the northeast, the lands of Central Asia abutting Western China and modern-day Russia became increasingly landlocked, mountainous, and desert-like. To the north, the landlocked Caspian Sea (Khazar Sea or Upper Sea), which separated Europe from Asia, meant the only possible expansion route for conquering Iranian kingdoms was northwest into Mesopotamia, the Middle East, and Mediterranean Europe. From here, victorious Iranian empires had access to Northern Africa and Arabia.

The lowlands of the Fertile Crescent formed a natural funnel across the Middle Eastern countries to link classical Europe to Persia. Classical antiquity is broadly considered the period between the 8th century BCE and a few centuries after the collapse of the Roman Empire (approximately the 6th century CE). The classical period was a time when the cultures of Greece and Rome flourished, and they wielded enormous power across most of the known world of continental Europe, North Africa, and Western Asia. This Greco-Roman world spread its dominions as far as northwestern India in efforts to increase its influence and wealth—usually with disastrous consequences. At the same time, a multitude of cultures arose, flourished, and declined between the Mediterranean countries and the Near East. Some of the most noteworthy were those of Mesopotamia.

Mesopotamia is the ancient name for the eastern reaches of the Fertile Crescent, mostly including the present-day countries of Iraq and Kuwait to the west of Iran. The Mesopotamian cultures flourished during the classical era, with the earliest archaeological evidence[5] of formal settlements dating to southern Mesopotamia and the Ubaid period of c. 6500-3800 BCE. This is a rather broad period of the mostly Chalcolithic[6] Age (c. late 4000s to the late 3000s BCE) that bridged the Stone Age (from prehistory to c. 4500 BCE) to the Bronze Age (c. 3300-1200 BCE). The people of the Ubaid culture settled furthest south within Mesopotamia, closest to the mouth of the Tigris-Euphrates River system. The Ubaid period gave way to the first mega-culture of Mesopotamia—the Sumerians—who dominated the region for over two-and-a-half millennia from c. 4500-1900 BCE.

Once the people of the Ubaid era had settled along the shores of the Arabian Gulf, it could have been a natural progression for them to expand into the adjacent Zagros Mountains of Western Iran. The Zagros was an extensive, fertile, and naturally irrigated domain that would have provided natural protection from invaders. However, no clear archaeological evidence directly links the Mesopotamian people of the Ubaid period with the Zagros Mountains. Proof of trade in Ubaid pottery and other artifacts demonstrates that they had more natural connections with the Arabian Peninsula than with the Iranian Plateau.

The Zagros Mountains formed a natural barrier between the Mesopotamian plains and Iranian Plateau, but historical evidence (as well as a lack of indication of historical associations) suggests a complex but separate relationship between these two ancient societies. There is evidence of

agriculture in the foothills of the Zagros dating back to early Neolithic times; approximately 9000 BCE.[7] Stone tablets excavated in the second millennium before the Common Era describe an intricate but possibly strained association between the mountain and Mesopotamian peoples.

[3] Map of Ancient Mesopotamia and Western Iran showing Assyria, Babylonia, Sumer, and Elam. The Zagros Mountains run in a northwesterly-southeasterly direction to the north of Elam and west of the Iranian Plateau. On the Iranian Plateau, three of the Aryan clan areas are shown: Medes, Parthia, and Persia.

Several localized clans of the Zagros Mountains became significant over time, some nomadic and some permanent. However, the oldest and most significant of these were the Elamites from Elam. The people of Elam had a mysterious and unknown origin. They are believed to be a subset of the proto-Mesopotamian people, and specifically descendants of the Ubaid period.[8] However, the Elamites differentiated themselves through a unique language and early form of writing that remains undeciphered. Later, this writing developed into a type of cuneiform, although the singular style of Elamite communication suggests undefined origins for this culture that cannot be directly linked to any of the civilizations of the ancient Fertile

Crescent. Some historians propose that the Elamites simply evolved out of the ancient paleolithic peoples of the Zagros Mountains, but this theory also remains unconfirmed.

Even after the Elamite people became absorbed into the dominant Aryan clans of the broader Iranian Plateau after 550 BCE, their language remained different. Elamite was considered a lingua isolate unrelated to any other form of Mesopotamian or Iranian language. The origins of this language and unknown early form of writing are most likely the clues to the enigmatic beginnings of the Elamite people.

The Elamites were established by the late 4th century BCE, at least one-to-two millennia before the Aryan migration towards Iran. Elam included a region of highlands, as well as lowlands stretching from the outlying Zagros Mountains to the Lower Sea. The civilization stretched northwest to include the capital of Susa and southeast past the capital of Anshan, although historical records do not concur on the exact boundaries of the kingdom. (Elam equates mostly with the present-day Iranian provinces of Khuzestan and Ilam and parts of Fars, Lorestan and Kermanshah, and some other provinces.) In the northern part of the Zagros Mountains, Susa was situated at the base of the mountains between two fertile river valleys. Anshan was more than six hundred kilometers (373 miles) southeast of Susa toward the south of the Zagros Mountains. Anshan was in the mountain highlands, more removed and protected from the mighty empires of Mesopotamia during its time. The modern name for Anshan is Tal-i Malyan (or Tall-e Malyan[9]), which is now an archaeological site of approximately two kilometers-squared (200 hectares).

The Elamites need to be understood within their regional context of ancient Mesopotamia to the west. Four significant superpowers dominated the region from the mid-5th millennium BCE until the start of the Persian Empires in 550 BCE. These were the Sumerians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians, and the Persians themselves.

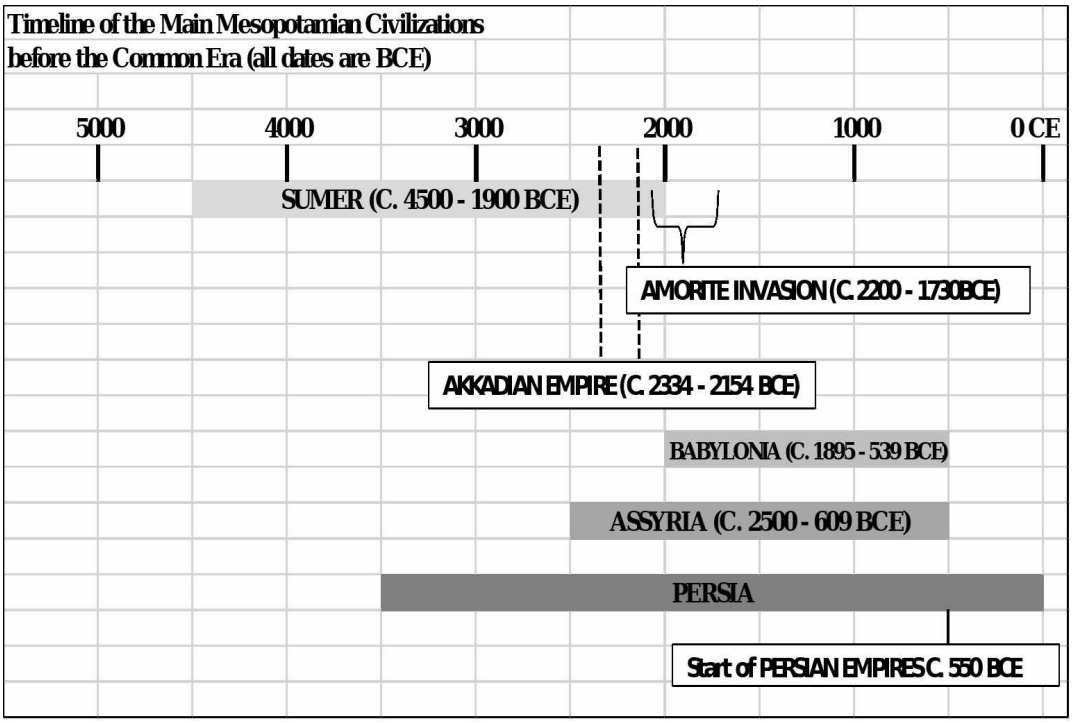
Sumer, or Sumeria, is the earliest known permanent civilization of Mesopotamia dating from approximately 4500 BCE. Situated in modern-day southern Iraq, Sumer had Ur or Uruk as its capital. After its collapse in approximately 1900 BCE, the empire became absorbed into Babylonia. Babylonia continued until the rise of the first Persian Empire (the Achaemenid Empire) in 550 BCE, when the Persians swallowed up Babylonia and its powerful northern neighbor Assyria as part of their own

dominions. (Northern Mesopotamia was also referred to as Subartu in several eras.)

There are several accepted theories attributed to the collapse of Sumer. One theory is that the changing soil conditions due to drought and increased salinity of agricultural land caused a mass migration of Sumerians into central and northern Mesopotamia over several generations. At the same time, southern Mesopotamia experienced a mass infiltration of semi-nomadic (and apparently "uncivilized") tribes from the northwest, who were also purportedly escaping climate change and drought in their own regions. These tribes were known as the Amorites[10]—a Semitic people from the Levant.[11] (Semitic in historical terms refers to a large group of Semitic-language speakers of Afroasiatic origins, most broadly including the major languages of Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic.)

The Amorites (or the Amurru in ancient texts) originally occupied a large area west of the upper Euphrates River, including the biblical area of Canaan and modern-day Syria. The Amorite people reportedly filtered into Sumeria starting about 2200 BCE and eventually took control of the various city-states, taking advantage of the disintegration of the final dynasty of Sumer—the Dynasty of Ur—by 2004 BCE. (Ur was an urban node in southern Mesopotamia at the mouth of the Euphrates River.) It is mentioned in historical records that the kings of the third and final Dynasty of Ur (Ur III) were forced to construct a 270-kilometer (170-mile) wall from the Tigris to the Euphrates Rivers to prevent the mass influx of Amorites.

It is likely that the infiltration of the Amurru people into southern Mesopotamia was more of a massive and unwelcome migration than a military conquest since some historians debate whether the Second and Third Dynasties of Ur were in place and functioning by the 21st century BCE. The only definite conquest was when the Amorites sacked Ur in 2004 BCE. Afterward, these unwelcome nomads became the dominant force, first in southern Mesopotamia and then northern Mesopotamia, for the next three hundred years until approximately 1730 BCE.


Timeline of the Main Mesopotamian Civilizations
before the Common Era (all dates are BCE)
5000
4000
3000
2000
1000
0 CE
SUMER (C. 4500 - 1900 BCE)
AMORITE INVASION (C. 2200 - 1730BCE)
AKKADIAN EMPIRE (C. 2334 - 2154 BCE)
BABYLONIA (C. 1895 - 539 BCE)
ASSYRIA (C. 2500 - 609 BCE)
PERSIA
Start of PERSIAN EMPIRES C. 550 BCE

[4] Timeline of the Main Ancient Mesopotamian Civilizations from 4500-0 BCE.

Between 2334 BCE and 2154 BCE, there was a brief interlude of almost two centuries in the Sumerian dynasties, punctuated by the Akkadian Empire. Akkad was a region developed around its capital city of the same name (Agade), proposed to be situated near Babylon[12] where the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers came closest.[13] The center of the Akkadian power structure was further north upriver from the seat of ancient Sumerian power, which was focused mostly around the land closest to the Gulf of Persia.

The Akkadian Empire was founded by an obscure and unlikely ruler called Sargon of Akkad (2334-2279 BCE), or Sargon "the Great."[14] He displaced the ruling Sumerian king of the Ur Dynasty and set about conquering the surrounding Mesopotamian lands, including Elam. The Akkadian Empire collapsed in approximately 2154 BCE, and southern Mesopotamia existed in a dark time of confusion until the start of the third and final Dynasty of Ur in 2112 BCE. In the interim, the warlike Gutians from the north-central Zagros Mountains (north of Elam) invaded and dominated southern Mesopotamia. The Guti (Guteans or Quti) were largely nomadic and likely swept into the former Akkadian Empire when a power vacuum was created as the Akkadian dynasties disintegrated. Their homelands were referred to as Gutium, which included parts of the western Iranian Plateau.

The Guti ruled over former Akkadian and Sumerian dominions for several

generations, but the historical records of their Sumero-Akkadian enemies describe them as barbarians and that their reign was marked by chaos. Eventually, by 2050 BCE, the king of the Sumerian city of Uruk finally expelled the Guti from southern Mesopotamia. The Guti had dominated the region for about a century before a final Sumerian dynasty[15] ruled during a "Sumerian Renaissance" that would unfortunately define the end of Sumer. It was about this time that the Sumerian and Akkadian cultures merged into a single Sumero-Akkadian ethnicity that used both their languages interchangeably (although typically Akkadian was the written language of legal and administrative proceedings and Sumerian the religious text.)

The collapse of the Akkadian Empire marked the eventual collapse of ancient Sumeria as the Amorites added pressure to a shifting political and agrarian landscape. Fights over agricultural land and water forced mass migrations away from the ancient capitals of Sumer. The remaining peoples of Akkad and Sumer split to either join the Assyrians in northern/upper Mesopotamia or become the Babylonians, who remained in the central-south river system around the ancient Akkad capital.

A new empire developed around the town of Babylon, close to the city of Kish and the previous Akkad capital. Babylon was established on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River, an estimated 85 kilometers (53 miles) south of present-day Baghdad, Iraq. Babylon is considered one of the largest cities of the ancient world and may have reached a population in excess of 200,000 people at its height. Although there are historical references to the town in approximately the 24th century BCE,[16] it reached its height in the 6th century BCE. Babylon likely existed far earlier than 2300 BCE as a smaller, less significant settlement.

Kish was similarly a prominent city throughout Mesopotamian history, situated in central-south Mesopotamia between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, east of Babylon and 80 kilometers (50 miles) south of modern-day Baghdad. Kish features repeatedly throughout the ancient histories of present-day Iraq and Iran and was purportedly the first city to be occupied by a royal dynasty after the biblical flood. Kish was definitely occupied from the 6th century BCE with a strongly Semitic-speaking population. It was a religiously important town and, like many Mesopotamian cities of the era, grew to influence a large area. The first king of Akkad (Sargon the Great) first declared himself "King of Kish" before reformulating an Akkadian region.

Texts indicate that whatever the original foundations of Babylon, considerable building work was done to the city during the Akkadian Empire. But it was the Amorites in approximately the 19th century BCE that officially settled the city, with a series of chieftains declaring independence from surrounding lands and building walls around it. As the displaced civilizations of Sumer settled in central-south Mesopotamia, the region naturally gave rise to the First, or Old, Babylonian Empire in c. 1894 BCE. Babylon was made the official capital of this empire and remained so during the reign of its most infamous king, Hammurabi, who ruled from approximately 1792-1750 BCE.

Old Babylon lasted three centuries until 1595 BCE, when the Hittite Empire of Asia Minor (central Turkey) conquered the city, followed shortly thereafter by the Kassites of the Zagros Mountains. It is possible that the Kassites took control of Babylon within the same year, as the Hittites did not remain in the conquered city. The Kassites retained a hold on Babylon for over four centuries until 1160 BCE. Thereafter, the empire was subject to wave upon wave of foreign domination, with some brief interim periods of native (Akkadian) rulership. Tribes from the Levant, Assyria, Egypt, and Elam took control of Babylonia, including the Chaldeans, a migratory group of Semitic-speaking people from the Levant who settled in southeastern Mesopotamia.

The Chaldeans[17] were one of several Middle Eastern peoples who had settled in modern-day southern Iraq. Chaldea became the area between the Euphrates River Delta and the Arabian desert, at the head of the Persian Gulf. The Chaldeans are first mentioned by the Assyrians in historical writings from the 9th century BCE. It appears that the Assyrians and Chaldeans were in constant competition for the conquest of Babylon.

The Neo-Babylonian Empire of 626-539 BCE was the final epic of Babylonia in which the Chaldeans fought off the Assyrians for good and ruled until the rise of the first Persian Empire. During this final period, Chaldea became synonymous with Babylonia, and it marked the pinnacle of Babylonian dominance, including widespread and impressive building projects in the capital of Babylon.[18] The Babylonian Empire constantly held the city of Babylon as its capital but morphed in size over the one-and-a-half millennia of its regional domination. At its smallest, the Babylon Empire was little more than a greater metropolitan area around the city between the fertile river plains of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. At its greatest, during the Neo-Babylonia Era, the empire stretched to cover all of Mesopotamia, the Middle

East, and parts of western Arabia.

Assyria was the northern-most civilization that played an important role in the ancient history of Mesopotamia. Assyria was situated in upper Mesopotamia, with Nineveh (near Mosul in modern-day northern Iraq) as its capital on the eastern bank of the Tigris River. During the half-century before the Persian conquest, Nineveh was the largest city in the ancient world. But the origins of Assyria lie in the more southern town of Assur and date to approximately 2600 BCE. The Assyrians embarked on a significant military campaign in the late 10th century BCE, at which time their dominions stretched from Libya in northern Africa to the Iranian Plateau and south to the Arabian Sea.

The Assyrians came under Akkadian rule in the 3rd century BCE, and they entered a period of Neo-Sumerian rule during the Third Dynasty of Ur. The first five hundred years of the second millennium BCE was the Old Assyrian Empire, followed by the Early, Middle (c. 1392-1056 BCE), and New (c. 911-609 BCE) Assyrian periods. Bitter infighting during the late New Assyrian Empire allowed their territory to be chipped away by surrounding powers. The final collapse of Mesopotamia in the 7th century BCE, at the hands of the Medes and Persians, heralded the end of the ancient Assyrian Empire, although it retained its culture and regional influence until Islamization in the 600s CE.

Chapter 3-Proto & Old Elamite Periods (3500-1500 BCE)

The ancient Mesopotamian civilizations are attributed with creating some of the oldest cities in the known history of the world and some of the earliest examples of cultural artifacts, arts, and technologies. The Sumerian city of Uruk on the eastern bank of the Euphrates and north of Ur is considered the oldest city in the world. Susa, one of the two primary capitals of Elam, is similarly considered one of the oldest urban nodes in the world, with evidence of settled people dating back to approximately 7000 BCE. An area referred to in historical texts as Susiana was the plain near Susa closest to Mesopotamia and most heavily influenced by the Euphrates-Tigris River cultures, often coming under their rulership.

The other major city of the Zagros, Anshan, was separated from Susa by a considerable distance. Both towns were off the major Asiatic trade routes, being difficult to access due to their surrounding mountainous topography. This isolation could have contributed to the Elamite's unique evolution. Besides the fertile and protected locales of both Susa and Anshan, larger copper ore deposits at Anshan and Susa may have been one of the factors that led to their settlement. Agriculture formed the basis of Elamite economic life, and there is evidence of localized and regional trade from the start of the Elamite culture. This trade appeared to be in metals, precious stones, and timber, particularly with lowland Mesopotamia.

In approximately the 5th century BCE, several scattered urban communities in the Zagros region eventually merged into a single entity that would grow to become the dominant military and political power of Elam. Although the boundaries of the geographical area were never exact and changed between eras, the Elamites referred to their lands as Haltamti/Haltami, which meant "highlands." The Sumerians referred to the Elamites as Nim Maki (people of the highlands). Sargon of Akkad included all the lands that would become the future Persian Empire, such as the Iranian Plateau, within Elam. Regardless of the actual geographical boundaries of Elam, or even Susiana, evidence suggests that Elam had a profound and far-reaching influence on surrounding regions. Iran, Pakistan, Central Asia, and the southern shores of Arabia were all impacted at one time or another politically, economically, religiously, or culturally by Elam.

The original people of Elam are believed to be descendants of the Ubaid culture[19] of ancient Sumeria. But, in approximately the 4th century BCE, their cultural development advanced away from Mesopotamian cultures towards a unique identity of their own. This identity would form the foundations of ancient Iran, as this Proto-Elamite civilization spread its influence throughout the Zagros of southwestern Iran and onto the Iranian Plateau.

The early Elamites left very little textual evidence of their culture except for thousands of stone tablets of pictograms that are assumed to have referred mostly to accounting and trading. The indigenous knowledge of these people is extremely limited; most historical facts are drawn from records of Mesopotamia, specifically the start of the Akkadian Empire in c. 2335 BCE. The Proto-Elamite script, which has remained undeciphered to this day, was in use until about 2700 BCE, considered the end of the Proto-Elamite period and the start of the Old Elamite period. The first reference to the kingdom of Elam was by King Enmebaragesi of Kish[20] in c. 2650 BCE, at the beginning of the Old Period, which was to last until 1500 BCE and the start of the Middle Elamite period. But it was from the Akkadian era onwards that Elam made its greatest mark on Near Eastern history.

The Proto-Elamite era (also known as Susa III) can be broadly described as stretching from the 4th century BCE to approximately 2700 BCE, but the official start of the culture was approximately 3500 BCE. The Mesopotamian Uruk period (4200-3300 BCE) naturally developed into a Proto-Elamite civilization with a series of settlements across ancient Iran linked through trade and culture to form a “Proto-Elamite horizon.” The Uruk period (or Susa II) defines the establishment of ordered Mesopotamian societies that were first uncovered around Uruk, Sumeria. These urbanized societies show significant evidence of religious ritualism, hierarchical state governance systems, writing, and the gross production of art, pottery, and other sophisticated goods. Toward the end of the Uruk period, these cultural and societal norms had spread outwards from Mesopotamia, including to Elam. To this day, archaeologists cannot attribute specific art discovered in Elam to either Elam or Mesopotamia.

The Proto-Elamite period coincides with an archaeological period in ancient Iranian history known as the Banesh period. Banesh is a modern-day village in the Fars Province[21] closest to the ancient capital of Anshan (approximately ten kilometers, or six miles, southwest of Banesh). Banesh

shows evidence of being occupied from the sixth millennium BCE, and during the Proto-Elamite period, the beginnings of the ancient Iranian culture developed in the Kor (Kur) River basin.[22] The Kor is a perennial river fed by snowmelt from the Zagros Mountains. There was a significant interrelationship between Susa and Anshan from the beginning of their development. The urban node of Susa began to grow in strength during the Susa III period, and the pottery excavated during this era is primarily of Banesh (Anshan) origins.

Significant remains near Anshan show that it was a huge city. Its people relied on mobile pastoralism and agriculture for survival, with wheat and sheep forming the basis of their diets. In c. 3000 BCE, Anshan was approximately half a kilometer squared (50 hectares), the largest settlement in Elam until the growth of Susa during the Old Elamite era. Anshan was surrounded by a multitude of subsidiary villages and campsites, which explains why the local region of Banesh was rich in finds. The settlement of Anshan may have been bolstered by the presence of large copper ore deposits in the area. However, during the Proto-Elamite period, there was only limited evidence of copper mining and working, mostly for personal use.

Excavations at Anshan reveal a city wall and abundant mud-brick houses, including what appear to be public buildings and permanent crafters' stalls on the outskirts of the city. Walls of the larger buildings were painted, and paint-decorated and unadorned wares were produced and traded with Susa. Excavations reveal a reduction in the occupancy and production at Anshan towards the end of the Proto-Elamite era that began to reestablish itself half a millennium later in c. 2200 BCE during the Old Elamite age.[23]

[5] The Kor River in the Zagros Mountains, Fars Province, Iran, with surrounding agricultural lands (modern times).

The Old Elamite period coincides with the Middle Bronze Age. There is a gap of a few centuries between the Proto-Elamite and the Old Elamite period (c. 2700-2350 BCE) in which archaeologists have not been able to discern much activity. Three noteworthy dynasties succeeded during the Old Elamite era—the Awan, or Peli, Dynasty (c. 2350-2150 BCE), the Shimashki, or Simaški, Dynasty (c. 2200-1900 BCE), and the Sukkalmah, or Epartid, Dynasty (c. 1900-1500 BCE). There is archaeological evidence that the various kingdoms of Elam existed simultaneously but with a dominant royal house ruling the broader region—almost like a federation of states. Kings in separate domains of Elam may have ruled at one time but would have been subservient to the ruling dynasty.

The dynasties sprang up broadly around specific geographic nodes in Elam. Awan was purportedly on the foothills north of Susiana, although evidence suggests it may have been a political and a geographical district of early Anshan (or Anzan). In the mid-third century BCE, the Awan rulers overcame the First Dynasty of Ur, and several kings of Awan, starting with the first King Peli, ruled over southern Sumeria. However, the Elamites' attempts to dominate the ancient superpowers of Mesopotamia usually failed. During the Awan Dynasty specifically, the Akkadian Empire overcame Susa and ruled it for several generations, c. 2300-2200 BCE. With the rise of the Third Dynasty of Ur (c. 2100-2000 BCE) and the infiltration of Gutians into Elam,

the Awan lineage disappeared into obscurity, and the Shimashki Dynasty grew powerful.

The Shimashki Dynasty, also named after its tribal lands, haled from the central-southern Zagros Mountains, closer to Anshan than Susa. Twelve kings for the Awan Dynasty and a further twelve for the Shimashki Dynasty were found listed on stone tablets. This list of twenty-four kings on the *Elamite King List of Susa* is by no means exhaustive since neither the regnal years of the kings nor their lineage or right to ascendancy are mentioned. However, some of the kings mentioned appear in alternative sources from Susiana and Mesopotamia, thus legitimizing the list.

During the last century of the third millennium BCE (within the Shimashki Dynasty of the Elamites), the Neo-Sumerian Empire of the Dynasty of Ur (c. 2112-2004 BCE) conquered Elam. It then sought to conquer all the tribes of the Zagros Mountains. Unfortunately, the Sumerians' efforts had the opposite effect of uniting the mountain tribes against the conquering invaders, who were subsequently expelled from the Zagros. The early part of the Shimashki Dynasty was punctuated with regular attacks from Mesopotamia. The Mesopotamian kings consistently coveted the raw materials of the Zagros Mountains and the Iranian Plateau. These interloping kings seemed to alternate between peaceful diplomacy and forceful acquisition. At times, inter-dynastic marriages between Mesopotamia and Elam were the basis of good associations.

However, as the end of the third millennium BCE approached, the Mesopotamian kingdoms were weakening. In 2004 BCE, the Shimashki Elamites finally brought down Ur III, defeating and capturing its last ruler, Ibbi-Sin, and maintaining military power over southern Mesopotamia. (This conquest is attributed to the sixth king of the Shimashki, Kindattu or Kindadu.) They ruled southern Mesopotamia for two decades before being ejected.

Ibbi-Sin was captured with the assistance of the Isin settlement centered approximately 32 kilometers (20 miles) south of Nippur.[24] Although part of central Mesopotamia, the Isin formed a powerful city-state at times, responsible for their own governance and military might.[25] At other periods in history, Isin was simply another settlement node of the Mesopotamian empires that could be called upon for support. The Isin, along with other surrounding tribes that had developed full- or quasi-independence, were an integral part of ancient Iran. Larsa, 25 kilometers (16 miles) southeast of

Uruk, was similarly an important city-state during the Sumerian era. After the collapse of the Third Dynasty of Ur, a period known as the Isin-Larsa period (c. 2025-1763 BCE) unfolded in Mesopotamia, bridging the end of the might of Ur with the rise of Old Babylon.

Although both Isin and Larsa vied for power over central-lower Mesopotamia during this period, neither was mighty enough to gain control permanently. Each center needed to make alliances with neighboring powers to gain ground. While Larsa was close to the Persian Gulf and able to capitalize on trade routes, Isin was more vulnerable and open to defeat. Another important grouping was the Lullubi (or Lullu) from Lulubum, who were a group of tribes settled north of the Zagros Mountains on the Shahrizor Plain. The Lullubi were neighbors to Gutium. The historical relationship between the Elamites and these adjacent tribes was one of alternating alliance and enmity. The Western Iranian ancient peoples pulled together to conquer neighboring empires and then turned against one another. Since a conquest meant that one of these tribes (usually Elam) had established a superior position of power, they were once again a threat to the region and autonomous rule.

While the Elamites' direct rule in southern Mesopotamia ceased in c. 1984 BCE, their overall influence in the region increased over the next centuries. They began supporting weaker states in Mesopotamia against stronger states and making strategic military alliances to capitalize on any fractures in the Sumero-Akkadian Empire. By approximately 1900 BCE, the city-states of Susa and Anshan were united under the common banner of the Haltamti, or Elamites. At this time, the Epartid, or Sukkalmah Dynasty, had overtaken the Shimashki as the dominant lineage in Elam. The founder of the Sukkalmah Dynasty was King Eparti, also known as King Ebarat, who referred to himself as Sar or Shar (king). Possibly known as Shilhaha (or the father of the second king by this name), this first king of the Sukkalmah Dynasty may also have been the ninth king of the preceding Shimashki Dynasty.

Historians' difficulties with deciphering the Linear Elamite script used from c. 2300 until 1850 BCE, in tandem with Elamite cuneiform, have led to assumptions in the interpretation of royal lineages. The Linear Elamite was a pictographic language that may have reflected a spoken language only. *Sukkalmah* was a term of leadership, not family affiliation, loosely meaning "Grand Regent." Historical records suggest it was a term borrowed from civilizations to the west of Elam and became the de facto name of the final ruling Elamite dynasty of the Old Period.

The Sukkalmah Dynasty marked the end of Old Elam and approximately coincided with the Old Babylonia Era and the Old Assyria period (c. 2025-1364 BCE). Susa was the center of Elamite control during this period, which may have been an enforced capital center since Larsa and Isin persisted in trying to take the city. For most of this dynasty, southern-central Mesopotamia was under the control of Elam, with the kings west of Elam referring to the Grand Regent as "father." The Mesopotamian subservience included King Hammurabi of Babylon until the Babylonians consolidated Elam's enemies against them and ejected the Elamites from Mesopotamia. By c. 1763 BCE, Hammurabi had control of southern Mesopotamia.

Thirty Sukkalmah kings are listed as the Lords of Elam, Anshan, and Shimashki from c. 1973 to 1500 BCE.[26] Although the emphasis during this era seemed to be mostly on Susa, the Grand Regents were specific about governing over a unified Elam that included a vast part of the Zagros Mountains from beyond Susa in the north to beyond Anshan in the south. But the Sukkalmah period was unique in its method of dynastic succession because it followed a matriarchal lineage whereby men inherited the throne through their mothers' relationship to the regent.[27]

For instance, a ruling regent's successor would not be his oldest brother or oldest son but the oldest son of his oldest sister. The successor was known as the Sukkal (Regent) and was assigned to serve in a part of the kingdom that would prepare him for the role of Grand Regent. Overall, Elamite royal women appeared to have a much higher status than the men. One of the largest ancient human sculptures is a bronze 1.3-meter (4.3-foot) replica of Queen Napirasu (Napir-Asu), the wife of a king of the Middle Elamite period (c. 1260 BCE). The Elamite religion also differed most prominently from that of Mesopotamia in that a trio of female goddesses headed their pantheon of gods, whereas most pantheons of deities in the region at that time were male.

The Shimashki and Sukkalmah Elamite Dynasties grew into the most powerful empires that Western Asia had yet experienced. The lands surrounding their domains came heavily under their influence through trade, political associations, and military pressures. During Shimashki rule, the ancient Iranian domains are alleged to have reached from the Zagros onto the northern Iranian Plateau and even as far as the Caspian Sea. By the 18th century BCE, when the Elamites were driven from Mesopotamia, the Sukkalmah Dynasty had been a ruling superpower in Mesopotamia for over a century. During this dynasty, the Anshan capital grew to the greatest height it

would reach in the Elamite age, only to be superseded during the Achaemenid Empire. There was a very close association between Susa and Anshan during the Old Elamite era, with Anshan borrowing aspects of its culture and administration from Mesopotamia.

In the early 16th century BCE, towards the end of the Old Elamite period, the Hittites took Babylonia but withdrew from the region shortly thereafter. The Hittite removal left a power vacuum in the Tigris-Euphrates area, which was sporadically occupied by marauding and nomadic peoples, such as the Hurrians and the Kassites. The Hurrians had moved south from the Caucasus Mountains, situated to the east of modern-day Turkey and the north of modern-day Iran. This tribe was eventually absorbed into the Assyrian Empires of northern Mesopotamia (Subartu) and into the Kassite culture that had replaced Babylonia. The origin of the Kassites is not entirely clear except that they represented a small but popular military elite, most likely from the Zagros Mountains. The Kassites overtook Babylonia and dominated the southern alluvial plains for almost half a millennium,[28] introducing their most precious mode of transportation—the horse-drawn chariot. But during the rulership of these interloping tribes, the Elamites managed to defend their mountainous position and remain independent.

The Elamites before 1500 BCE left little in the way of historical information, and most of what has been uncovered is of an administrative or enigmatic nature. Two distinctive sets of Proto-Elamite tablets have been uncovered at Susa during the modern era. Most of the tablets fall within an older group dating to c. 2900-2600 BCE or even earlier, approximately within the Proto-Elamite period. These are economic or accounting tablets that kept records of interchanges, crop yields, and the like. The tablets display symbols only, and archaeologists don’t believe that these logograms, or ideograms, have phonetic sounds associated with them. Therefore, while ancient Proto-Elamite can be interpreted within these examples, it cannot be truly deciphered or translated into modern language. The interpretation assumes an orderly decimal system of record-keeping due to the consistent and repetitive arrangement of symbols, although experts are still unsure of these exact quantities or entries. (The context of the content is known via comparison to Mesopotamian writing, specifically numbers, during the same era.) It is highly probable that no spoken language accompanied Proto-Elamite but that the Proto-Elamites used a different language, with a possibly different written form.

The second set of tablets uncovered in Susa are a few centuries younger than the accounting tablets and far fewer in number. These “monumental tablets”—of which only twenty-two have been discovered, compared with the thousands of accounting tablets—are currently neither interpreted nor translated[29] The monumental inscriptions are written in a Bronze Age writing system, known as Linear Elamite, that dates from c. 2300-1850 BCE, within the Old Elamite period. However, some dating puts Linear Elamite closer to the end of the Proto-Elamite period. Proto-Elamite and Linear Elamite may have coexisted, and there is no evidence to suggest that one script evolved into the other or is even related to the other. There is a possibility that Linear Elamite represented the spoken form of the early Elamite language.

Linear Elamite was used contemporaneously with Elamite Cuneiform and may have fallen into disuse with the death of the last Awan king. Elamite Cuneiform was first dated to 2250 BCE, and its usage extends beyond the Achaemenid period into the 5th century BCE. Elamite Cuneiform has been interpreted and translated because it is a derivative of both Sumerian and Akkadian cuneiform and therefore has abundant sources for its translation.[30] However, the original Elamite language was unrelated to either the Semitic or Indo-European languages and, like the source of the Elamite people, remains a mystery to this day.

The final Sukkalmah Dynasty of the Old Elamite period is the most well-documented of the Proto- and Old Elamite periods since many cuneiform tablets and other artifacts were uncovered near Susa. However, few surviving records mark the end of the Old Elamite period and the beginning of the Middle and Neo-Elamite eras. The establishment of a new ruling royal family in approximately 1500 BCE indicated the start of a new era. This royal family was from the southern highland capital of Anshan and was alleged to be frequently at war with the Kassites of Babylonia.

Chapter 4-Middle & Neo-Elamite Periods (1500-540 BCE)

The Zagros Mountains cover an estimated land area of 0.32 million square kilometers (32 million hectares). They provide a natural barrier to sandstorms and dust and are a substantial catchment area, collecting up to half of modern-day Iran's surface water.[31]

The capital of Anshan and many smaller Elamite settlements were nestled in the Zagros, but Susa was technically on the low rolling foothills between the mountains and the floodplains. Elam was defined by the power balance between these two centers. During the Middle and Neo-Elamite periods, the focus moved from the capital of Anshan towards Susa; Anshan would be reestablished as a primary center in the classical era.

During the third millennium BCE, Susa had grown from a minor settlement of 0.11 square kilometers (11 ha) to 0.46 square kilometers (46 ha) in approximately the Sukkalmah epoch. At its height, Susa was 0.85 square kilometers (85 ha), about one-and-a-half times bigger than Elamite Anshan. There is evidence of careful town planning in both Susa and Anshan. Both had permanent soil fertility and access to water, and so a continuous food supply.

Over the ages, Susa alternated between being most influenced by the Mesopotamian cultures of Akkad and Ur and the highland polities of the Old Elamite dynasties. Susa was a crucial Near Eastern international capital ideally positioned as a nexus that brought together the cultures, people, and politics of the plains to the west and the mountains to the east. Susa experienced over four thousand years of history, which was at times politically turbulent. Many of the abundant archaeological finds at the site originated in the Mesopotamian empires and tell a regional story of ancient events.

Susa, or modern-day Shush, was referred to as Shushan in the Bible and by many other names abroad, such as Susiane in ancient Greece. The early settlement of Susa before the Proto-Elamite era is considered the Susa I period, Susa II and III were Proto-Elamite, and Susa IV and V were in the Old Elamite period. As the settlement of Susa grew around the Karkheh Kūr (Choaspes, Karun, or Shavur) River, layer upon layer of construction was established from the late fifth millennium BCE until well beyond the Arab

conquest into the Middle Ages of the 14th century CE.

Situated in the modern-day Iranian province of Khuzestan, about 250 kilometers (160 miles) east of the Tigris River, Susa was known as Ŝuŝan (or Ŝuŝun) by its residents in ancient times, which may have been a reference to its overruling deity, Inshushinak. Over the millennia, the city had experienced periods of falling mostly under Mesopotamian or Elamite rule or even remaining relatively independent, but during the Middle Elamite Period (c. 1500-1100 BCE), Susa experienced an "Elamization," specifically a move away from previously Akkadian cultural norms.

Elam, particularly Susa, reached the height of its power in the Middle Elamite period. Three dynasties of kings ruled over four centuries within the broader Anshanite Dynasty: the Kidinuids, the Igihalkids (Igehalkids), and the Sutrukids (Shutrukids). The ruling kings of the new Anshanite Dynasty referred to themselves as "King of Anshan and Susa," and the dynasties have been named after their first, or most important, ruler. The Elamite language, religion, and culture grew in importance throughout Elam and Susiana during the middle period and reached its zenith with the construction of the Chogha Zanbil temple complex thirty kilometers (nineteen miles) southeast of Susa in c. 1300 BCE in the Middle Elamite II period.

Middle Elam was the time when Elam began to demonstrate political power. The kings built temples and statues to the gods in exchange for military might and long, powerful reigns. The era is divided into three dynasties known as Middle Elam I, II, and III.

Middle Elam I (c. 1500-1400 BCE)

The first dynasty, or Kidinuids, ruled for a hundred years from c. 1500-1400 BCE during Middle Elam I and included five recorded kings, beginning with King Kidinu. These kings used the addendum "servant of Kirwashir," referring to an Elamite deity of the highlands. The Kidinuids were the first Elamite rulers to give equal attention to the north, through Susa, and the south, through Anshan—uniting Elam under a common power banner.

The order in which the kings ruled is uncertain, and a familial linkage between them has not been confirmed. There also appears to have been a historical break between the Old and Middle Elamite periods. The Kidinuid era is marked by an expansion of a site south of Susa by its final king, Tepti-Ahar. The site is thirteen kilometers (eight miles) south of Susa and twenty kilometers (twelve miles) northwest of Chogha Zanbil Ziggurat. Known in

the modern-day as Haft Tepe in Khuzestan Province, the ancient location was called Kabnak and seemed to take some of the power from Susa for a brief time. Haft Tepe has produced the remains of a temple, including a funerary complex below it. A ziggurat may have been built at one point, and there is evidence of a palace with suites and courtyards. Texts from two kings that ruled during Middle Elam I have been unearthed at the excavation site.

Middle Elam II (c. 1400-1210 BCE)

The Igihalkids of Middle Elam II are thought to have had ten rulers. As with the Kidinuids, this list is potentially neither exhaustive nor entirely accurate. This was a period in Elamite history when the dynasties sought to forge stronger relationships with the Kassites that ruled Babylon. Intermarriages between Igihalkid royalty and Kassite princesses were common, and many children were produced from these alliances to reinforce the empirical interrelationships.

Despite these marriages, in approximately 1320, the Kassite King Kurigalzu II overcame and occupied Elam for a time. There was another failed attempt about a hundred years later in 1230 BCE by Babylonian Kassite King Kashtiliash IV. But, as the Babylonian Kassites' strength waned, they increasingly came under the control of the Assyrian Empire during the middle period of Assyrian rule (c. 1363-912 BCE). In 1224 and 1222–1217 BCE, King Kiddin-Khutran III (Kidin-Hutran III) of Elam again repulsed the Kassites to retain Elam, defeating Kassite Kings Enlil-nadin-shumi and Adad-shuma-iddina respectively. Kiddin-Khutran III was the last Igihalkid king, although the dynasty's most famous king was its seventh ruler, Untash-Napirisha.

During the Igihalkid dynasty, Elam moved firmly away from Akkadian culture and developed a permanent culture of its own. Certain kings sought to institute and blend the highland gods of the Zagros with the lowland belief systems. King Untash-Napirisha (Untaš-Napiriša, r. c. 1275-1240 BCE) founded Chogha Zanbil (Čoḡa Zanbīl), a politico-religious complex at which religious tolerance and diversity of worship were practiced. This temple complex had been built during the Kidinuid era and was known as ancient Dur Untash (Dur-Untaš or Āl Untaš-Napiriša). Untash-Napirisha began the work by constructing a small ziggurat, or stepped temple pyramid, in the center of the complex.

The initial smaller pyramid was dedicated to the Susa god Insusinak, but the

king later destroyed it to build a far larger one of five stories. This ziggurat was 105 square meters (345 square feet) and surrounded by up to fifty other temples and buildings. It stood 53 meters tall (174 feet) and had a temple at its summit. The new construction was dedicated to the gods of Susa, Anshan, and Mesopotamia in an act of regional goodwill. Furthermore, three concentric walls were built around the complex, representing the full pantheon of Elamite gods from the lowlands and highlands, both old and new. Historians conjecture that this was a political move to unite the peoples of the mountains and Anshan with Susiana, consolidating Untash-Napirisha's power as king over all of Elam and making him friend of Mesopotamia.

[6] Image of the remains of Chogha Zanbil. The original five-stepped temple pyramid was made of mud brick with a baked brick outer layer. The temple was decorated with gypsum and ornaments of glass and faience (tin-glazed pottery). Elamite cuneiform writing covered the outer walls, and a temple was perched on top as the fifth story. Terracotta statues of creatures such as griffins and bulls guarded the entrance to the ziggurat, and several rings of protective walls surrounded it.

Chogha Zanbil is one of the few ziggurats that survives outside of Mesopotamia (Iraq). It dates from approximately 1250 BCE but was not built to house people or conduct religious ceremonies. Eleven inner rooms were designed to house gods, with the overall temple dedicated to the main deity, Inshushinak. Although the king intended a far larger temple with twenty-two

rooms, this was never completed, and construction was abandoned after his death. But Untash-Napirisha was the only king to have left his mark on Chogha Zanbil. His successor, Sutruk-Nakhunte, allegedly carried certain inscriptions to Susa, thus reaffirming Susa's dominance over Elam.

Middle Elam III (c. 1210-1100 BCE)

The most marked evolution from Middle Elam II to Middle Elam III was Elam's shift from defense to offense with its Mesopotamian neighbors. The warlike Sutrukids of the third dynasty of Middle Elam ruled at the peak of the power of Elam but also instigated many conflicts with the Kassites, whom Assyria was simultaneously bombarding. King Sutruk-Nakhunte (Shutruk-Nakhkunte, Nahhunte, or Nahunte) and his three sons, Kutir-Nakhunte II, Shilhak-In-Shushinak (Susinak), and Khutelutush-In-Shushinak (Hutelutuš-Inšušinak), divided their attention between conquering Babylonia and construction projects in Elam. Under their rulership, temples and public buildings were built and refurbished. Unfortunately, this Elamite expansion required frequent military raids into Mesopotamia to gain treasures and other booty.

Sutruk-Nakhunte (r. 1184–1155 BCE) and his sons were the (approximately) five kings of the dynasty that became known as the Sutrukids. The Sutrukid era was the closest that Elam ever came to an Elamite Empire and at times included the lands of southern Mesopotamia. The patriarch of the lineage immediately set about plundering Babylonia and inscribing his name on the spoils of war he brought home before installing them in Susa. Between 1175 and 1158 BCE, the Elamites under Sutruk-Nakhunte stole the Victory Stele of Naram-Sin, the Law Code of Hammurabi, and many more Mesopotamian political and religious keepsakes.

The Stele of Naram-Sin dates to approximately 2250 BCE in the Akkadian era. This 200 cm (79 in) high, 150 cm (59 in) wide flat stone relief carved in pink limestone depicts King Naram-Sin leading his people to victory against the Lullubi, specifically King Satuni. Naram-Sin (r. 2254-2218 BCE) was the grandson of King Sargon and therefore the third successor of the dynasty.

The Code of Hammurabi was an upright basalt rock obelisk 2.25 meters (7.4 ft) high created in approximately 1750 BCE. The code included a set of almost three hundred rules that determined the law of the Babylonian society over which Hammurabi ruled for over four decades during the 18th century BCE. The laws are inscribed on the front and back of the stele in Akkadian

cuneiform. A sculptured scene topping the statuette shows the king in an act of worship before the sun god Shamash, who presents the king with symbols of his sovereignty. The Code of Hammurabi was unearthed during an archaeological dig in Susa, more than three thousand years after the Elamites stole it.

By 1158 BCE, Babylonia had largely been annexed by Ashur-Dan I of Assyria from the north and Sutruk-Nakhunte from the south. The Elamites killed the ruling king of Babylon, Zababa-shuma-iddin (Zababa-šuma-iddina), and replaced him with the oldest crown prince, Kutir-Nakhunte II, as a puppet king of Elam. This maneuver effectively ended Kassite rule in Babylonia. Kutir-Nakhunte ruled for three years before being expelled by native Akkadian-speaking Babylonians.

Once Kutir-Nakhunte II had succeeded his father as king of Elam, the Elamites invaded Assyria. They even held the capital of Arrapha (modern Kirkuk) for a time before being defeated by Assyrian King Ashur-Dan I and forced to accept a peace treaty. The Elamite king's son and successor, Kutir-Nakhunte III, continued with this barbaric behavior by removing the cult statue of Marduk from a Babylonian temple as well as the Manishtushu Obelisk.[32]

The final confirmed king of the Sutrukid dynasty was Khutelutush-In-Shushinak (Hutelutuš-Inšušinak). According to his title, he may have been the offspring of an incestuous union between his father, Sutruk-Nakhunte, and his sister, Nakhunte-Utu. Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar I (r. c. 1121-1100) upheld a sustained onslaught against Elam during this era and attacked Susa, overcoming King Khutelutush-In-Shushinak and stealing back the statue of Marduk.[33] (The cult idol Marduk was known as *Bel*, and King Nebuchadnezzar also purportedly retrieved the goddess idol *Il-Aliya*.)

The Elamite king escaped Susa and fled to Anshan, later returning to Susa to be succeeded by his brother Shilhak-Inshushinak. Shilhak-Inshushinak campaigned widely through eastern and northeastern Mesopotamia and left evidence of his exploits on inscriptions throughout Susa. Like his predecessors, he used the bounty of his raids to embellish local temples and extend Susiana building projects. One final king, Shilhana-Hamru-Lagamar, may have ruled at the end of the dynasty.

Unfortunately, King Sutruk-Nakhunte and his sons' belligerent behavior would in time spell doom for Elam. Mesopotamia finally sacked Susa by in

the 7th century BCE, mostly in retaliation for centuries of Elamite onslaught. Elam became an obscure empire for centuries before it was reestablished in the classical era under the control of other empires.

Like the other transitional Elamite periods, there is a gap in historical written records from the Middle to the Neo-Elamite period. The end of the Sutrukid lineage disappeared in the written records as infighting and familial assassinations consumed the bloodline. The population in Fars (Anshan) seemed to decline again from c. 1600- 1300 BCE, and the remaining population was separated into two distinct cultural groups—Qale (Quale) and Shoga Teimuran (Soga Teymuran). Very little historical information is available on these groups.

However, numerous archaeological finds at Tal-i Malyan (Anshan) and Susa confirm that the Middle Elamite period was one of political fragmentation and shifting religious practices. A set of rock reliefs in the Zagros Mountains at Kul-e Farah (near the modern-day town of Izeh in Khuzestan, Iran) that date from the 9th to the 6th century BCE (Neo-Elamite) depict an interesting sociocultural climate. Archaeologists are not in agreement over the meaning or the dating of the reliefs, and some may have been created during the Middle Elamite era.

The reliefs depict scenes of animal sacrifices, banquets, processions, and musical performances. In some of the carvings, up to two hundred individuals are accompanied by a god who presides over the proceedings. These images clearly depict a common people with a specific ethnic identity who share in the worship of old Elamite gods despite the recurring influxes of foreign deities and rulers. The reliefs express a powerful and common highland Elamite culture destined to have socio-political ramifications far into the birth of a new Persia and the advent of the Achaemenid Empire.

The Neo-Elamite Era of c. 1100-540 BCE

The Neo-Elamite era covers the period from Middle Elam until the conquest of ancient Iran by Cyrus the Great of the Persian Achaemenids. Neo-Elam, like Middle Elam, has been split into three phases of time. Little is known about Neo-Elam I, but Neo-Elam II was well-documented by the Assyrians, who were frequently at war with the Elamites. Information on Neo-Elam III is fragmented and unsubstantiated, but more documents have been unearthed than for Neo-Elam I. During Neo-Elam II, the southern Mesopotamians banded together with Elamite rulers to repulse the growing might of Assyria.

The fourth ruler of Neo-Elam II, Sutruk-Nakhunte II, continued the titling tradition from Middle Elam.

Archaeological evidence from western Iran during this period is unsubstantial. The scarcity of artifacts is most likely due to undiscovered locations for excavation, destruction of evidence by invading peoples, and fragmentation in the Elamite society after the collapse of the final dynasty of Middle Elam.

The Elamites speak through time in their rock reliefs located at several sites throughout ancient Iran. However, the written records for the Neo-Elamite epoch are largely restricted to the Assyrian war records, the Babylonian Chronicles, and stone tablets from Susa.

Besides the religious rock relief sanctuary at Kul-e-Farah, there are at least four other known locations of reliefs at Kurangun, Naqs-e Rustam, Shekaft-e Salman, and Sarpol-e Zahab.Kurangun is about 300 kilometers southeast of Izeh in Fars. Naqsh-e Rustam is also in Fars but approximately five kilometers (three miles) northwest of ancient Persepolis[34] on the Iranian Plateau. Shekaft-e Salman (Eshkaft-e Salman or “Salomon’s Cave”) is ten kilometers southwest of Kul-e-Farah, also near the town of Izeh.

Shekaft-e Salman has four Elamite reliefs dating to the late Middle and Neo-Elamite periods. The cave in which the reliefs are carved is considered a romantic grotto of spiritual delights, as a seasonal stream cascades over the images at certain times of the year. Sarpol-e Zahab is further north in the modern-day province of Kermanshah, close to the Iraqi border (or ancient Mesopotamia). This area contains reliefs mostly from the Lullubi and Parthian Kingdoms.

All the rock reliefs portray religious scenes similar to those at Kul-e-Farah and are situated in quiet, natural places of outdoor worship—generally on the flat faces of cliffs overlooking rivers far from human habitation. The reliefs influenced the empires that overtook ancient Iran from the classical era and set a precedent for later Persian sculptural and religious tradition. However, the reliefs of the classical post-Elamite era found mostly on the southwestern Iranian Plateau eclipsed those of the Zagros Elamites in size, detail, and splendor.

The Babylonian Chronicles are a large series of tablets that were unearthed during excavations in the 19th century. The origin and date of these fifty or more stone tablets are mostly unknown. The tablets are written in Babylonian

cuneiform and broadly date from the mid-8th century BCE to the early 3rd century CE. The chronicles were put together by Chaldean astronomers and provide the main narrative for ancient Babylonian events.

Neo-Elamite I (c. 1100-770 BCE)

The Neo-Assyrian Empire (911-605 BCE) dominated Neo-Elam I and II and overcame most of the regional empires despite their efforts to form alliances (such as Elam, Chaldea, and Babylonia). Connections between lower-middle Mesopotamia and Elam were still present at the start of the Neo-Elamite period since, from circa 984 to 979 BCE, the Babylonian king Mar-biti-apla-usur was said to have hailed from Elam. Also, from 823 to 811 BCE, the Elamites and Babylonians (under King Marduk-balassu-iqbi) fought unsuccessfully against the Assyrian king, Shamsi-Adad V.

No known kings are recorded to have ruled in the three centuries of Neo-Elam I. It is possible Elam returned to a federation of smaller satrapies (provinces) after the disintegration of the turbulent Sutrukid era. There are also indications that royal infighting from the end of the Middle Elamite period continued during Neo-Elamite I. Most of the kings of Neo-Elam continued to refer to themselves as “kings of Anshan and Susa.” It seems that Anshan was still partially Elamite, despite the regional shrinkage.

However, Elam was not the exhaustive extent of pre-Persian Iran. There is evidence across the Iranian Plateau of smaller settlements dating from the 4th millennium BCE that continued a peaceful and ongoing interrelationship with Elam. There was evidently much trading of wares, with these plateau villages similarly using the Proto-Elamite script. Many of these villages sprang up around ore mining sites or deposits of semiprecious stones such as chlorite, carnelian, and agate. There is also evidence of ongoing trade between the Iranian Plateau and Central Asia, presumably accessible via the extended plateau that joined them and by way of the Caspian Sea. By the early 2nd millennium BCE, it seems that Elam (particularly the highlands) was linked to central and western Iran via a broad cultural zone attested by some writings, a shared ceramic style, and the cross-over of goods for trade. A degree of economic and political unity was likely in place within ancient Iran at this time.

A continuing local cultural tradition within the Elamite regional sphere of influence prospered from Proto times into the Iron Age (c. 1200 BCE, or Middle Elam III). These ancient Iranians outside of Elam who preceded, or

were separate from, the rulership of dynasties and empires often settled near river deltas and appear to have lived in a fair degree of affluence. But by the start of the 2nd millennium BCE, historical evidence across the plateau tells of a steady disbanding of urban and larger settlements. This is assumed to have resulted from mass migrations due to either violent or disruptive invasions or changing climatic conditions, particularly water shortages.

About this time, the Aryans were migrating onto the plateau, and archaeological surveys suggest that settlements were shifted or reestablished. New farming methods were introduced, including new livestock such as the horse. The decline of the Proto-Iranian people associated with Elam and their replacement by Neo-Iranians (Iranian-Aryans and Indo-Europeans) took at least half a millennium. Like the origins of many ancient Iranian peoples, the Elamites' transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age is shrouded in mystery. However, by the 1st millennium BCE, the migrations onto the Iranian Plateau had pushed the true Elamites west towards Mesopotamia, and Elam became broadly equated with Susiana.

Neo-Elamite II (c. 770-646 BCE)

At the same time the Aryans were moving south onto the plateau, Indo-European tribes were moving in from the northwest. Similarly enemies of Assyria, these tribes included the Medes (Medians), the Parsu, the Parthians, the Sagartians, the Margians, the Bactrians, the Sogdians, and more. The Medians were from the northwestern highland reaches of Iran and also occupied some of northeastern and eastern Mesopotamia. The Parsu was a tribe from a region near modern-day Lake Urmia in the highlands of far northwestern Iran. The Parni, who eventually founded Parthia, haled from Central Asia—mostly present-day Turkmenistan. These nomads made their way to northeastern Iran. The exact location of the early Sagartians is unknown, but the Margians, Bactrians, and Sogdians were from the full spectrum of countries in modern-day Central Asia. Bactria—which would play a significant role in Iran's ancient history—was north of the Hindu Kush Mountain Range and south of the Oxus River, approximately equating to present-day Afghanistan and smaller parts of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Elam was essentially a vassal of Assyria until the early 600s BCE when it came completely under foreign control. The constant influx of foreigners to Iran did not appear in Elamite texts but was documented by the Assyrians. The Babylonian Chronicles only started to provide historical information from approximately the 700s, which is why Neo-Assyria I is mostly devoid

of information. The Assyrians referred to the Medes as the “powerful Medes” and the remaining Indo-European tribes as “distant Medes.” As interloping nomadic tribes (presumably fleeing Assyrian tyranny) moved across the Iranian Plateau to populate it, the Parsu settled in modern-day Fars, which later became the “Persia” known to the world. From the first half of the 8th century until the mid-7th century BCE, approximately fifteen recorded Elamite kings would be the final independent regents to rule Elam before a decisive Assyrian invasion at the end of Neo-Elam II.

From 722-705 BCE, Elam positioned itself as Assyria’s enemy when it supported Chaldean chief Merodach-baladan (r. c. 722/710-703/2 BCE) in his attempt to liberate Babylon from Assyria under Sargon II (r. c. 722-705 BCE). The Elamite King Humban-nikas (r. c. 743-717 BCE), son of Humban-tahra, sided with Assyria to no avail. Humban-nikas’ successor, Sutruk-Nakhunte II (r. c. 716-699 BCE), son of Humban-umena II, was required to flee before the Assyrians in an attempt on Elam in c. 710 BCE. Sutruk-Nakhunte was later murdered by his brother, who ruled for about six years before being assassinated and replaced by Kudur-Nukhunte. Kudur (r. c. 693/2 BCE) quickly abdicated in favor of Humban-umena III, who had a brief rule of a few years. Humban-umena III rebuilt the Elamite army to once again side with the Babylonians against Assyria in c. 691 BCE. These wars with Assyria during the Neo-Elam period were largely inconclusive.

However, Elam’s affiliation with Babylonia began to weaken. From c. 680 to 664 BCE, during the reign of Elamite Kings Humban-Haltas[35] II and Urtak, relations with Assyria improved to the extent that Elam was sent wheat from Assyria during a time of famine. But the temporary truce didn’t last, and after several rulership changes in Assyria and Elam, the neighboring empires were once again at each other’s throats.

The conflict in Mesopotamia would continue through three generations of Assyria’s successive kings: Sennacherib (r. 705-681 BCE), Esarhaddon, or Assur-nadin-sumi, (r. 681-669 BCE), and the final and greatest king of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, Ashurbanipal (r. 668-627 BCE). Relations between Elam and Assyria during Ashurbanipal’s reign were relatively good at first, but as the complexity of power struggles in Mesopotamia mounted towards the end of the Elamite era, relations between the various tribes and empires disintegrated.

Ashurbanipal maneuvered his way into regional power by placing key persons at strategic nodes throughout Mesopotamia. The Assyrian king

appears to have installed the son of Elamite King Urtak, Humban-Nikas II, on the Elamite throne in approximately 653 BCE since he had taken refuge in Assyria for a time. Humban-Nikas II was positioned at an Elamite outpost closest to Mesopotamia, potentially with the objective of using him as a puppet king as the Assyrian Empire encroached upon Elam. Another Elamite king, Tammaritu, was posted to the eastern Zagros near Anshan at approximately the same time.

Ashurbanipal's younger brother, Shamash-shum-ukin, was given rulership of Babylonia but later turned on Ashurbanipal to wrestle the rulership of Mesopotamia for himself. The Elamites fatefully capitalized on this royal infighting in Ashurbanipal's court, backing the king's younger brother, who was eventually subsumed by Ashurbanipal. Babylon was besieged in 650 BCE and finally fell in 648 BCE, with Shamash-shum-ukin dying in a fire during the battle. At the same time, infighting, power grabs, and assassinations within the Elamite royal family made the entire Mesopotamian region a center of chaos and shifting political loyalties. In a furious act of retaliation, Ashurbanipal led his armies to overrun the whole of Mesopotamia, taking it back for himself and teaching all his enemies a lesson.

The Neo-Elamite II period is most well known for the Battle of Susa in 647/6 BCE, in which the Assyrians attacked the Elamites, striking at the capital of Susa. Ashurbanipal is said to have attacked in retaliation for generations of Elamite conquest in Mesopotamia and their decision to double-cross him. A tablet unearthed in the late 19th century in Nineveh contains the avenging king's boastful words:

"Susa, the great holy city, abode of their gods, seat of their mysteries, I conquered. I entered its palaces, I opened their treasuries where silver and gold, goods and wealth were amassed…I destroyed the ziggurat of Susa. I smashed its shining copper horns. I reduced the temples of Elam to naught; their gods and goddesses I scattered to the winds. The tombs of their ancient and recent kings I devastated, I exposed to the sun, and I carried away their bones toward the land of Ashur.[36] I devastated the provinces of Elam and on their lands I sowed salt."

The conquest of Elam was also mentioned in the biblical book of Ezekiel. Ashurbanipal allegedly captured the final true Elamite king, Humban-Haltas III.[37] Foreign rule continued in Susa and Elam. However, evidence suggests that King Ashurbanipal's boasts were an exaggeration: the Elamite culture

and city life continued as normal, particularly after Ashurbanipal's death when the Elamites returned to their cities. The Elamites rose again for another century of Elamite cultural rulership, albeit as a vassal state of other more powerful kingdoms.

Neo-Elamite III (c. 646-539 BCE)

The Neo-Elam III era began with Ashurbanipal's capture of Susa (and apparently Elam). Elam would never again act as an independent state or empire, although at least six kings are known to have continued ruling Elam during Neo-Elam III as petty kings. Over three hundred exhumed stone tablets record the rulerships of this era, although insufficient written evidence was uncovered in the rest of Mesopotamia to completely substantiate the Elamite findings.

Although Elam was not subsumed by Ashurbanipal as this king indicates, it is likely that the complete lack of royal tombs and written evidence from this time is a result of Assyrian destruction. The Assyrian Empire declined after Ashurbanipal's death (631 BCE), and Elam allied with Medes, Babylon, Chaldea, and other Mesopotamian powers to attack Assyria. By 612 BCE, the various kingdoms of Mesopotamia had sacked the Assyrian cities, leading to its final decline by 609 BCE.

Beginning after the sack of Susa, there is evidence that three Elamite kings ruled between 646 and 585 BCE: Sutur-Nakhunte, Hallutas-Insusinak, and Atta-hamiti-Insusinak, who still referred to themselves as *King of Anshan and Susa*. However, the following three kings retained the title of "king" only. Ummanunu is thought to have been the fourth ruling king of Neo-Elam III. Evidence of his reign was uncovered from the ruins of the ancient Acropolis of Susa. From 585 to 539 BCE, Ummanunu and two other kings in this familial lineage, Silhak-Insusinak II and Tepti-Humban-Insusinak, ruled in succession. This lineage of six kings is based upon limited archaeological evidence. It is possible that Elam consisted of a cluster of minor kingdoms during neo-Elam III, including its own kings and successors, who may or may not have been subservient to the Susanian rulers.

But despite the Assyrian presence that lasted until Ashurbanipal's death, forces to the north of Elam were growing in strength—specifically the Medes of the Median Empire. By the late 8th century BCE, the Medes had united under Chief Dayukka (Deioces, r. 727-675 BCE). By the late 7th century BCE, Dayukka's grandson, Cyaxares (r. 625-585 BCE), used the Elamite

alliance with the Medians against them to overcome the remnants of Elam and occupy Anshan.

Cyaxares captured the Elamite capital in 617 BCE, around the time the Medians were overtaking Mesopotamia. By 585 BCE, Elam was completely under Median control. At about the same time, Parsu (Parsus or Persis) on the plateau of Fars had developed into a petty kingdom of its own under King Teispes (r. c. 640 BCE). Teispes' indirect successor, King Cambyses I (r. 580-559 BCE), was the father of Cyrus the Great, who eventually overthrew Median King Cyaxares' successor, Astyages (r. 585-550 BCE), to form the Achaemenid Empire.

Elam's capture by the Achaemenid Persians in 540/539 BCE heralded an entirely new era for ancient Iran. Although the Assyrians, Medians, and Achaemenids overcame Elam in quick succession, abundant evidence suggests that the Elamite culture held firm and influenced the succeeding empires of Persia. Vassal kings of Elam existed under the Medes, and even under the mighty Achaemenids, Elam remained a province of its own. Conquerors of Elam also curiously kept the Elamite pantheon of gods that preceded the more formal Zoroastrian religion that began in the 7th century BCE.

Chapter 5-The Median Empire

Like the Elamite histories, the sources of Median antiquity are scattered and sometimes confusing. The main sources of history for Media[38] and the Median (or Medes) people are ancient Babylonian and Assyrian texts, Greek and Armenian texts, archaeological evidence, and some references in the Bible. Two primary sources are used to recreate the history of Media, although they were written several centuries after the events took place. The *Histories* is an anthology by the Greek researcher Herodotus (c. 480-429 BCE), considered one of the first historians in the world. This collection of lectures was written to preserve the great stories of ancient civilizations such as Egypt, Persia, and Greece. The *Persian History (Persica)* by the Greek physician Ctesias of Cnidus, although lost, has also been quoted by other authors throughout history. Ctesias wrote about ancient Persia and India, and while his references may not give an accurate depiction of history, they do provide insight into the life and times of Persia, particularly the royal courts of c. 404-397 BCE (under Persian King Artaxeres II Mnemon), where he was stationed for a time.[39]

Whether an actual Median Empire or Kingdom ever existed as a sovereign entity is debated since the Medians did not leave texts that verify their consolidated power. However, an influential group called the Medes, including a number of sub-tribes, lived in the vicinity of northern Elam and are referenced during and after the Assyrian Empire by external sources. The main Medes population dwelt in a triad between the three ancient capitals of Rhagae, Aspadana, and Ecbatana (modern-day Tehran, Isfahan, and Hamadan), although the decentralized population expanded well beyond these limits at certain periods.

The area of Media occupied northwestern Iran, although over time its limits changed with the Medes' area of influence. The western limits of Media were usually the Zagros Mountains, beyond which existed the kingdoms of Mesopotamia. To its south were Elam and Persia, and the vast extent of the Iranian Plateau spread east and southeast. The Caspian Sea and the highlands of Central Asia to Media's north meant this empire existed in a pocket and could only expand by overcoming and conquering surrounding kingdoms. Six tribes of Medians were listed in historical records, one of which is the "Arizantoi/Arizanti" of Aryan lineage. The other five were the Busae, Paretaceni, Struchates, Budii, and Magi.

The capital of Media was Ecbatana, or modern-day Hamadan[40]—approximately equidistant between Tehran (the modern capital of Iran) and the Iraqi border. Along the ancient road that connected Babylon to Ecbatana was a village called Bagastana (in modern-day Kermanshah Province), or "place where the Gods dwell." Upon a flat isolated rock on a cliff face of Mount Behistun near Bagastana is the Behistun Inscription. This graphic relief portrays the Zoroastrian god, Ahura Mazda,[41] gracing King Darius of Persia as a supreme leader who overcame many tribes, including a long line of their leaders. In addition to the imagery is a multilingual inscription written in Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian.

Persian emperor Darius the Great (r. 522-486 BCE) created the inscription, which describes his lineage and ascension to the throne, as well as his continued dominance over the Persian Empire. The road between Mesopotamia and Ecbatana was an ancient regional highway (the Great Khorāsān Road), so the king was using the relief as a political message.

To the east of Media, a pass through the Elburz Mountains[42]—the Caspian Gate—separated Media from Parthia. Parthia occupied the northern section of the Iranian Plateau, but over time, the Parthians moved south to fill the central plateau as well, directly encroaching on the Medians and Persians of Pars.

From its height (c. 700-550 BCE) to the time of the Seleucid Empire (c. 312-63 BCE), Media, and specifically its capital of Ecbatana, existed at the center of the Silk Road trade route that linked China to the Mediterranean. To the south, highways led to the main Persian capitals of Persepolis and Pasargadae. Media controlled the lucrative east-west trade and enjoyed agricultural bounty throughout the fertile valleys and plains of the northern Zagros. The Medes had abundant livestock, particularly horses,[43] most coveted by the Assyrians and Persians. A large population of Medes was spread out in rural villages throughout Media, with just a few main cities and towns drawing larger settlements. Although the Medes, like the Elamites, were ultimately conquered and became vassals of surrounding empires, the region itself was renowned for its bounty and therefore became a powerful epicenter of the ancient world.

The exact origins of the Medes people are unclear, but there is evidence that they moved in to occupy the northern Zagros Mountains in approximately the first quarter of the first millennium BCE. (Evidence of urban settlements in Media dates to this period.) The ancestors of Media were an Indo-European

speaking tribe that mixed with the ancient Elamites already settled within the region and came to occupy Media at about the same time the Aryans were moving south onto the plateau. The first official record of Media is in the Assyrian annals (c. 858-824 BCE), which references them as enemies of the Assyrian king, Shalmaneser III. The Median Kingdom—which was settled according to its various tribes—was described as spreading as far east as the Salt Desert[44] and Mount Bikni (the ancient "lapis lazuli mountain" or modern-day Mount Damavand, east of Tehran).

From this Assyrian record onwards, the Assyrians were constantly at war with the Medes, and in 815 BCE, Assyrian King Shamsi-Adad V invaded Media. The Median king, Hanasiruka, fled into the safety of the mountains before returning to face his foe. The Assyrian annals state that 2,300 Medians were killed in the ensuing battle, with 140 of their cavalry taken prisoner. The capital at the time (Sagbita) and over a thousand smaller settlements were destroyed. From the time of this battle, the Medes were required to pay tribute to the Assyrians for generations to come. These tributes included horses, cattle, sheep, Bactrian camels, handicrafts, lapis lazuli, bronze, gold, silver, other fashioned metal objects, linen, and woolen fabrics. (These items were the key objects of trade between the Assyrians and Medians.) By 737 BCE, the Assyrians under King Tiglath-Pileser III conquered Media as far as their eastern borders at the Salt Desert. The Assyrian king also boasted that he deported 6,500 people from northwestern Iran into Syria and Phoenicia—presumably as slaves.

As the ancestors of the Medians moved from practicing nomadic pastoralism to permanent agriculture, they would have needed to create a united front against outside forces, such as the Assyrians. It is likely that the Medes became a nation of their own as a defensive mechanism against constant onslaught. The location of Media on the trade routes made it a likely target of continual attack, as the Assyrians coveted goods from the Near and Far East. Eventually, the capital of Ecbatana (Hagmatana, or the "gathering place") arose at a pivotal point linking the east to the west.

The history of imperial Media is reliant almost entirely upon Herodotus' works and references in Assyrian records. Four kings are listed over approximately a century and a half (c. 728/7-550 BCE): Deioces, Phraortes,[45] Cyaxares, and Astyages. These kings are listed as sharing one familial lineage. Although references to the last two kings have been found in corresponding Assyrian records, the first two kings (particularly the first

king, Deioces) may have been entirely fictitious figures. What is clear is that the Medes began to form a unified kingdom under a sovereign overlord in the late 8th to early 7th centuries BCE, which enabled them to make invasions into Assyria and Elam. Until this time, Median power may have remained relatively decentralized under various satrapies.

Deioces ruled for an astounding fifty-two years, after which his son, Phraortes, ruled for twenty-two years from c. 675 to 653. Deioces' grandson, Cyaxares, ruled for forty years from c. 625 to 585 BCE, bringing Media to its peak and swallowing Elam. Herodotus described Cyaxares as organizing the Median army into units of bowmen, spearmen, and cavalry. Finally, Astyages ruled Media until 550 BCE (thirty-five years) and the onset of the Achaemenid Empire in ancient Iran. (These regnal dates are considerably contested by historians, and it is possible that a period of Scythian rule occurred during the rulership of Cyaxares or between the rulerships of Phraortes and Cyaxares.)

King Deioces is said to have united the Median forces against Assyria, founding the Median dynasty. Phraortes continued the Median expansion by subjugating the Persian Empire that had developed in Fars. After a break in Median sovereignty, Cyaxares reasserted the Median domination over Persia and the middle-southern Zagros, or Elam. During Cyaxares' time, the Assyrian Empire finally fell, and Media became the dominant force in Mesopotamia.

From c. 650 to 630 BCE, the Scythian tribe from Siberia dominated the Medes. The Scythians, or Scyths, were nomadic warlike people that dominated many of the regions to the north of Iran from approximately the 8th century BCE. From the time of the Medians through the Achaemenid era, the Scythians played a prominent role in the history of Iran. Their extensive tribe mysteriously disappeared from Siberia by the 3rd century BCE and moved their center to Eastern Europe. From there, they waged a series of battles against Mediterranean powers. By the 3rd century of the Common Era, the Scythians were no longer a recognized or consolidated force.

The Scyths were a relatively barbaric tribe that put immense effort into weapons, warfare, and overcoming surrounding peoples. They were one of the first peoples in history to master mounted warfare, and their horses were an integral and sacred part of their society. The Scythians were wandering people who moved everywhere on horseback, with their women and children confined to wagons. However, they were considered an Iranian people,

speaking a version of an ancient Iranian language (like Aryan) and practicing similar religions such as Zoroastrianism and polytheism. The Scyths had no known written language but were master weapon-makers and metalworkers. This metalwork included jewelry and a distinctive Scythian art developed along the Silk Road.

The Scythians' activities in Southwest Asia around the Mesopotamian and Iranian regions were mostly lengthy military expeditions rather than permanent attempts to overcome and occupy the various kingdoms. Although the Scyths dominated the Medians and the Assyrians for a time, they never settled long enough to make the empires their own, as the Persians would later (thus creating a permanent Persian culture). The first mention of the Scyths was in Assyrian literature during the reign of King Esarhaddon in the first quarter of the 7th century BCE. During this Neo-Assyrian period, Scythian King Ispakaia was killed in a battle with the Mesopotamians. His son, Bartatua, went on to marry a princess of Assyria. This marital arrangement meant that Scythian domains became de facto vassals of Assyria.

Bartatua's son, Madyes, brought Scythian power in western Iran to its height when he invaded the Medes in 653 BCE. At the time, the Medes were also at war with the Assyrians, and the reigning Median king, Phraortes, was killed in battle. Scythian King Madyes then ruled over the Medes as part of the Assyrian Empire for twenty-eight years until c. 625 BCE. But, when the Assyrian Empire began disintegrating after the death of Ashurbanipal and Babylonia revolted against Assyria in 626 BCE, Media snatched back its sovereignty.

Median King Cyaxares, son of Phraortes, ascended to the throne in 625 BCE. Legends tell that Cyaxares invited the Scythians to a banquet. The Scyths, being great lovers of alcoholic drinks and hallucinogenic drugs, became drunk. The Median king is said to have then murdered his Scythian guests in cold blood. None of this story can be verified and may be an entirely fanciful version of events. In fact, it is more likely that the story is a fable because, by 615 BCE, the Medes and the Scythians were operating as allies against the remnants of the Assyrian Empire. Only by the 590s BCE were the Scythians finally expelled from Media by King Cyaxares, leaving Media to dominate Mesopotamia, Western Iran, and parts of Northern Iran and Western and Central Asia. (It is also highly possible that the Scythian withdrawal from Media was a natural and peaceful process that happened over time.)

By 615 BCE, Cyaxares had unified and reorganized the Medians to attack Assyria, taking the border city of Arrapkha, surrounding Nineveh, and making a stab for the capital of Assur in 614 BCE. However, it was only during a renewed assault in 612 BCE that Media finally captured Nineveh with the assistance of the Babylonians. In the ensuing battle, Assyrian King Sin-sar-iskun died. The allies, under Babylonian King Nabopolassar, banded together with Cyaxares to chase the Assyrians west into modern-day Syria.[46] Cyaxares' granddaughter was married to Nabopolassar's heir, Nebuchadnezzar II (r. 605-562 BCE), to bolster relations with the Babylonians.

Following the fall of the Assyrian Empire, the Babylonians appear to have taken command of Mesopotamia, and the Medians dominated the highlands of the Zagros Mountains. Although records indicate that Elam had fallen under Media's control from the start of the reign of Cyaxares in c. 625 BCE, after the fall of Assyria, this influence may have intensified. To the northwest, the bounds of Median land were determined by a battle against Lydia in 585 BCE. Lydia was an ancient kingdom in Western Asia in approximately western Turkey. The Medes fought a five-year-long battle to gain this territory. (By Cyaxares' reign, Lydia directly abutted Media.) As Lydian King Alyattes defended his land on May 29, 585 BCE, a solar eclipse turned the battlefield dark. Both sides took this as an omen for peace, and a border was created along the Halys River. (The Halys is the longest river in Turkey that formed a natural boundary with Media.) The peace treaty was sealed with a marriage between Aryene, daughter of Alyattes, and Astyages, son of Cyaxares.

Upon his death, Cyaxares controlled a vast area of land across Western Iran, including Fars. Records suggest that at the time of the reign of Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II (605-562 BCE), Media dominated the Mesopotamian lowlands, specifically the eastern and north-eastern sections closest to Media. Cyaxares' conquests paved the way for the might of the Persian Empire to be created under Cyrus the Great seventy-five years later. The use of the title "king of kings" (Khshayathiya or shāhanshāh) at this time indicates that Iran and its surrounding kingdoms still operated as a federation of vassal chiefdoms.

The final king of the Median Empire, King Astyages, was dethroned by his grandson Cyrus the Great (Cyrus II). History suggests that during Astyages' reign (of which little is known), Median relations with Babylon disintegrated.

This fracture occurred as Fars was gaining strength within the burgeoning Persian Empire of southwestern Iran. One of the Babylonian Chronicles[47] tells how King Astyages' own army fettered him and delivered him to Cyrus II of Persia, after which Cyrus II marched on Ecbatana and plundered the Median capital. Once Cyrus the Great had Media, he also gained the various regions that were loosely subject to Media: Armenia (northwestern Assyria), Parthia, Cappadocia (Central Anatolia, Turkey), and possibly Aria (northwestern Afghanistan). These regions had mostly been conquered by King Cyaxares and possibly Astyages during their reigns. Although Cyrus gained these territories by default when he gained Ecbatana, he would need to continue his expansion maneuvers and fight to hold some of these lands, particularly those on the outer edges of the Median Empire.

The final conquest of Susa and Elam by Assyria in 647/6 BCE most likely happened during the Scythian period. After the conquest of Elam, the Persians under King Cyrus I (Cyrus II's grandfather) became vassals of Assyria and sent gifts to King Ashurbanipal, including the Persian king's own son, Arukku, as a token representative. Between the fall of Susa and 625 BCE, as the Assyrian Empire began to weaken, Elam came entirely under the control of Media. Thus, once Cyrus II had the king of the Medes in his possession, he also had Elam—and therefore all of ancient Iran.

Cyrus the Great was purportedly the grandson of King Astyages. A convoluted legend says that King Astyages was forewarned that his grandson would overthrow him and ordered his grandson put to death, but this was not followed through by the appointed servant. Astyages had also ensured that his daughter would marry an obscure Persian rather than a high-ranking member of the royal houses of Media or Persia to doubly protect his throne, which seemingly also failed. In a war lasting three years from 553-550 BCE, Cyrus the Great captured and plundered Media, using the Medes troops against their king.

Over time, references to the peoples of Media, northeastern Mesopotamia, and northern Iran became muddled and overlapped geographically, culturally, and historically. The Gutians, Medians, and Scythians were often referred to as one people. Even into the Persian Empire, the extended Median people could also be called by the tribal names of the buffer states of Central and Western Asia, such as Mannaeans (northwestern Iran) or Urartu (Armenian highlands[48]). Later, once Media had come under the power of Persia, civilizations further afield such as Egypt, the Middle East, and Greece

referred to the Persians as “Medes.” Like many kingdoms that the Persians would conquer, foreigners considered Persian rule as an extension of the previous indigenous culture. There is also evidence that Medes were placed in key positions throughout the Persian Empire, particularly in Mesopotamia —as overlords, scribes, governors, and military personnel. Under Cyrus the Great at least, Medians coexisted peacefully and prosperously as subjects of Persia.

PART TWO: The Birth of a New Persia (550 BCE-225 CE)

Chapter 6-Cyrus the Great and His Many Conquests

"The Iranians regarded him as 'The Father,' Babylonians as 'The Liberator,'

Hellenes [Greeks] *as 'Law-Giver,' and the Hebrews as 'The Anointed of the Lord.'"*[49]

The Persians' battle against the Medes was neither brief nor insignificant. History speaks of a "Persian rebellion," although there are many indications the Medians instigated a quarrel with their southern vassals. Cyrus II (Kurash) became king of Anshan in 559 BCE, but it was six years before this new king was a threat to Media. Once Cyrus had the Persian throne, he united many clans under his tribal Pasargadae banner: the Maraphii, Maspii, Panthialaei, Derusiaei, Germanii, Dahae, Mardi, Dropici, and Sagarti. From this position of strength, the Persian leadership naturally became a threat to the might of Media, and the political and military situation in western Iran became unstable.

There is also much evidence that a group of generals and nobility of the Medians (specifically the Median military general Harpagus, who may have entered into a secret alliance with Cyrus) voluntarily chose to defect to Persia rather than fight against their neighbors under King Astyages. Historians note three battles between approximately 553/2 and 550 BCE. Nicolaus of Damascus (c. 64 BCE-4 CE) was a Jewish historian and philosopher from Greece who lived during a time when the Roman Empire was all-powerful. Nicolaus wrote prolifically on many aspects of history and his life and times, although much of his work has been lost. For Persian history, and others, he often referenced earlier authors such as Ctesias. Therefore, like many other contemporary histories of Persia, his work lacks some authenticity.

Nicolaus refers to a little-known battle in c. 551 BCE, the Battle of the Persian Border, which was part of the Persian's overall revolt against the Median Empire. Preceded by the Battle of Hyrba and followed by the Battle of Pasargadae, this second battle was not mentioned by Herodotus. The Battle of Hyrba in c. 553/2 BCE was supposedly the first battle between the Medes and Persians, and the Persians were the victors. The Battle of Hyrba started a decade-long series of conquests by Cyrus the Great, but only once he had overcome the might of Media.

Astyages' loss at Hyrba compelled him to invade Persia, and a second battle was fought on the road between Ecbatana and Pasargadae. The Battle of the Persian Border is significant because it was possibly the first battle in which Cyrus' father, Cambyses I, fought alongside his son to protect their Persian lands from the Medians.[50] This second battle during the war with the Medes was indecisive. During the third and final battle, the Battle of Pasargadae in 550 BCE, Cyrus became the final victor.

At about this time, Media, in its state of weakness, became threatened by other outside forces besides Persia—Media's northern provinces had begun to revolt during the Persian threat. The Persian army under Cyrus the Great protected Media from its enemies and quelled the uprisings, and the Persians came to peacefully rule Media and occupy the capital of Ecbatana. This military measure, and the fact that many sources claim Cyrus spared Astyages' life, may have contributed to a relatively uncontested overthrow of Media. Thirdly, most sources explain that Cyrus II was closely related to the Median king (and most likely his grandson) via Astyages' daughter, Mandane. (Another source claims that Cyrus II married a princess of Media to cement his rulership. If both sources are true, and it was another daughter of Astyages, technically Cyrus II would have married his aunt. Although intermarriages between clans and within royal families were common in ancient times, it seems more likely that the details of the Median-Persian marriages during this era were confused by Greek authors writing centuries after the events occurred.)

The Old Persian for Cyrus was Kūruš or Khūrvaš, meaning "he who humiliates the enemy." He was known to the Greeks as "Cyrus the Elder." Under the rulership of Cyrus II, or Cyrus the Great (c. 600-530 BCE[51], r. c. 559-530 BCE), the Persian Empire stretched to include Turkey and parts of Greece, all of Mesopotamia, and the Iranian Plateau. Cyrus ruled as the founder of the first official empire of ancient Iran, the Achaemenid Empire, which became the largest and most influential kingdom the world had known. The family name Achaemenes was an illustrious dynasty of Anshan, whose most infamous ruler governed towards the end of the 8th century or beginning of the 7th century BCE. Little is known about this apical ancestor who birthed a familial line of succession that would include the greatest leaders of the most powerful empire the world has known.

According to the Behistun Inscription, Achaemenes was the father of Teispes, who was the father of Cyrus I. Cyrus I, in turn, was the father of

Cambyses I (r. c. 580-559 BCE), who was the father of Cyrus the Great. If Darius I's inscription is to be believed, Cyrus the Great was the great-great-grandson of the founding member of the Achaemenid Empire. However, the Achaemenes clan lineage may have been a retrospective invention by Darius I, who technically snatched the throne from the descendants of Cyrus II. Darius I, who was around the same age as Cyrus the Great's sons, claimed ancestry from Achaemenes via a family line that had split after King Teispes.

Cyrus the Great himself did not leave any record of his links to the Achaemenes clan. Although an engraving connecting Cyrus II to the Achaemenid line was found in the ancient Iranian capital of Pasargadae, this inscription may have been a claim inserted by Darius well after Cyrus' death. Most notably, Cyrus II did not mention any connection to Achaemenes in his detailed description of his genealogy on the Cyrus Cylinder.

The Cyrus Cylinder, discovered in 1879, is a clay-baked cylinder resembling a large cylinder seal used to inscribe the words of the new king in many public places. Dating from c. 538-529 BCE, it is about 23 cm by 8 cm (9 in by 3 in). Cyrus created the seal after his conquest of Babylon, and it was written in ancient Akkadian using cuneiform script. The cylinder is the first known example of a declaration of human rights. Cyrus freed the slaves and returned other Mesopotamian exiles, advocated for religious pluralism, and promoted racial tolerance.[52] On the seal, Cyrus II states that he peacefully entered Babylon to liberate them from the tyrant King Nabonidus. He clarifies that he is descended from an official royal lineage of Anshan, his father is Cambyses, his grandfather is Cyrus I, and he is a descendant of Teispes. The cylinder confirms text from the Nabonidus Chronicles that states that the king of Babylon was unpopular and potentially mad and that the Persians came to occupy the city peacefully.

The ancient Iranians of broader Anshan and Pars were distinguished among three main tribes: the Pasargadae, the Maraphii, and the Maspii. The Pasargadae were associated with the Achaemenids, the royal family of Anshan. The Pasargadae were situated around their ancient capital of the same name. This capital was 78 kilometers (50 miles) northeast of Persepolis, a capital established later in the 6th century under Darius the Great's rule. Both capitals were in Fars, with Pasargadae about 90 kilometers (56 miles) northeast of modern-day Shiraz in Pars province on the Murghab Plain.

Pasargadae was founded by Cyrus the Great on the approximate site of his

final victory over the Medes. The archaeological site shows evidence of a citadel on a hill and two royal palaces, one of which includes the famed pillared audience hall for which the Persians were known. Pasargadae was also home to the mausoleum of Cyrus II, the burial ground of Cyrus' son, Cambyses II, and most notably, the oldest example of Persian gardens. The four-fold garden design, *chahar bagh* or *Charbagh* (*Bagh* means garden), is a symmetrical arrangement around a square pond collecting water from four perpendicular canal-lined walkways.

At Pasargadae, water was diverted from the nearby Pulvar River using a system of dams and canals. Geophysical surveys have discovered that an enormous shallow pond once existed as the centerpiece of the Pasargadae gardens (250 meters long by 50-100 meters wide and 1.5 meters deep). The palace, one of the four seasonal residences of the first king of the Persian Achaemenid Empire, was clearly built as a showpiece and audience center. The capital doesn't reveal much evidence of human habitation beyond that of the royal court, and it is clear that Pasargadae was a ceremonial capital rather than a fully functioning, habited citadel. By 515 BCE, Persepolis had replaced Pasargadae as the Persian ceremonial capital.

Although many leaders of imperial kingdoms in history have garnered the title "the Great," few have deserved them. However, Cyrus the Great most certainly deserved his reputation as an exemplary expander of the empire, military commander, and civil administrator. There is significant evidence that Cyrus didn't set about to randomly conquer weaker nations. His conquests were two-fold: either his supremacy was provoked and his kingdom threatened, or he was obliged to liberate surrounding empires from poor or despotic leaders. Generally, his reasons for expanding upon the limits of his empire were to protect his borders—and his people—from marauding and dangerous nomads.

There is evidence that Cyrus didn't demolish his captured lands but rather adopted their governance systems and ran the various regions as provinces, or satrapies, under a broader kingdom. The Persian conqueror reinforced his influence over his petty kingdoms by adopting the royal title of each area, thus placing himself as a successive sovereign to the rulers whose thrones he had usurped. Unlike the warring tribes before him, Cyrus the Great kept control of each conquered area, extending the Persian Empire to astounding limits. Cyrus emphasized peace in his conquered lands but in return demanded taxes and soldiers for his armies (whereas many of his regnal

predecessors had simply overrun their enemies and escaped with as much plunder as possible before evacuating the area). Media in particular retained a privileged position, second only to the main Persian Empire itself. Ecbatana became the second most important capital of Persia and the summer residence of the Persian royal family. The Median royal family continued in positions of privilege and as vassal sovereigns to Cyrus.

[7] Relief rock image from Pasargadae of Cyrus the Great as a winged genius with a Hemhem crown (or four-winged cherub tutelary divinity), as well as the modern illustrative copy.

Cyrus the Great's three main regions of conquest were Media, Babylonia, and Lydia. History suggests that both Media and Babylonia were under the rule of unstable, tyrannical leadership. Lydia picked a fight with Persia when its ruler, King Croesus, allied himself with several Greek nations (including Sparta), Babylonia, and Egypt (under Amasis II) to overthrow Cyrus. Croesus had consulted the Oracle at Delphi and marched against the Persian army based on a confusing response from the Athenian priestess that suggested "he would destroy a great empire." Croesus did not suspect that it might be his own empire in jeopardy.

As the might of a growing Persia continued to threaten the borders of Lydia,

Croesus marched his troops over the Halys River and began laying waste to Persian's Assyrian towns in the former Median lands of Cappadocia (Central Turkey), specifically Pteria. (Apparently, Croesus had been a brother-in-law of Astyages.) The two armies met near Pteria, but the battle was inconclusive. As winter approached in approximately the year 547/6 BCE, Croesus marched his armies west back to the safety of Lydia.

It was common practice in ancient times for armies to cease warfare during the ravages of winter, but Cyrus sent a surprise invading force during winter in pursuit of Croesus, using camels as the front infantry to confuse and disperse the enemy. Cyrus' armies attacked those of Lydia on their home turf near Thymbra, forcing the Lydian army into the safety of their capital at Sardis. (Sardis, or Sardes, was on the western Turkish coast and part of Ionia.) Sardis surrendered after a two-week siege, and Cyrus added Lydia to his already extensive empire. The Oracle of Delphi had been correct—although the Lydian army was destroyed, not the Persian.

History isn't clear on how Cyrus dealt with Croesus or whether he survived the battles with Persia. Cyrus the Great left a Lydian, Pactyes, in charge of the Lydian treasuries, although Pactyes revolted with the help of mercenaries. General Harpagus, who had played such a crucial role in creating the Persian Empire, was eventually sent to take control of Lydia. Harpagus went on to conquer Lydia's surrounding kingdoms of Phoenicia (Mediterranean coast), Lycia (southern Anatolia), and Cilicia (southeastern Anatolia), thus conquering all of Asia Minor.

Once Cyrus had secured the western border, he turned his attention eastwards to the Iranian Plateau. Hyrcania, Parthia, and Armenia had been part of the Median kingdom, and Cyrus set about gaining more regions across the plateau to secure his lands from wandering nomads such as the Scythians and the Saka (Sacae). Cyrus the Great crossed the Oxus River to reach the Jaxartes River, where he established his kingdom by building fortified towns. The Greco-Roman author Arrian of Nicomedia,[53] who wrote about Alexander the Great, described how Cyrus had founded a frontier settlement at Sogdia (Central Asia). Sogdia, or Sogdiana, included the town referred to by the Greeks as Cryopolis or Cyreschata after Cyrus. (Sogdia was north of Bactria and included several modern-day provinces in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.)

There are legends about the Persian army's experiences with the wandering nomads, including the Indo-European Saka of the Eurasian Steppe. Cyrus

purportedly captured their king, Amorges, so Amorges' wife, Sparethra, summoned a 500,000-strong army and overthrew Cyrus, after which point the Persians and Saka were allies. The truth of these legends and the exact extent of Cyrus' northern and eastern conquests is not certain, but during his time, the Persians clearly pushed hard to extend the limits of their territory—perhaps only as a defensive strategy. Likely, Cyrus the Great's influence reached as far as the Peshawar region of modern Pakistan, and there are rumors that he penetrated India.

Cyrus shifted his focus to Mesopotamia once the eastern limits of his empire were secured. His armies had control of the entirety of Elam (Susiana) by 540 BCE,[54] and he had control of Babylon by October of 539 BCE. Herodotus described the city of Babylon as surrounded (and also divided by) the Euphrates River that ran from north to south and had been diverted to entirely encompass the city in a natural moat. Additionally, substantial city walls and buttresses for military protection and prevention against flooding made Babylon an almost impenetrable city.

Herodotus goes on to tell how Cyrus diverted the water of the river tributary Gyndes (Diyala) to make the moat low enough to cross, but it took an entire summer. Apparently, the nearby town of Sippar (north of Babylon) opened its gates in surrender to Cyrus without a fight. Where the Gyndes entered the Tigris to the east of Babylon, the Persian army met the Babylonians in a battle near the town of Opis, after which it is possible the Babylonian king Nabonidus fled north. The Persians then split their troops into two and waited for the inhabitants to be distracted by a festival before infiltrating the city virtually unhindered.

Another version of events is that Cyrus sent his servant and governor of Gutium, Ugbaru, to capture Babylon. Ugbaru successfully took the city except for the inner temples, which took two weeks to surrender. Whichever account is correct (or possibly a combination of both tales), all accounts describe Cyrus as a welcome figure in Babylon. He was heralded as a hero by the people of the city. When Cyrus liberated Babylon, he stated in his cylinder seal that the Babylonians were jubilant to welcome him as ruler of their empire and that he and his men moved around the capital undisturbed. Cyrus claims that he reinstated the local god Marduk that King Nabonidus had removed and joined with the conquered (liberated) people of Babylon in the worship of this ancient deity.

Following are some extracts from the Cyrus Cylinder:

“I am Cyrus, king of the world, the great king, the powerful king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters of the world.

“I did not allow any to terrorize the land of Sumer and Akkad. I kept in view the needs of Babylon and all its sanctuaries to promote their well-being. The citizens of Babylon…I lifted their unbecoming yoke. Their dilapidated dwellings I restored. I put an end to their misfortunes.

“All the kings who sat in the throne rooms, throughout the four quarters, from the Upper to the Lower Sea, those who dwelt in…all the kings of the West Country who dwelt in tents, brought me their heavy tribute and kissed my feet in Babylon. From…to the cities of Ashur and Susa, Agade, Eshnuna, the cities of Zamban, Meurnu, Der, as far as the region of the land of Gutium, the holy cities beyond the Tigris whose sanctuaries had been in ruins over a long period, the Gods whose abode is in the midst of them. I returned to the places and housed them in lasting abodes.

“I gathered together all their inhabitants and restored to them their dwellings. The Gods of Sumer and Akkad whom Nabonidus had, to the anger of the Lord of the Gods, brought into Babylon, I at the bidding of Marduk, the great Lord, made to dwell in peace in their habitations, delightful abodes.”

Once Cyrus had liberated Babylon, he released the Jewish population enslaved there to return to Jerusalem. Furthermore, he funded the construction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem. These beneficent acts towards the Judaeans are confirmed in the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) and the Christian Bible. Some historians even suggest that without Cyrus’ remarkable act of humanity, the Jewish population may have vanished. Cyrus the Great not only rejuvenated a subjugated people but may also have paved the way for the other two Abrahamic monotheistic religions that came later—Christianity and Islam.

Over 40,000 Jews left Babylon under the patriarchs Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah until 445 BCE. They rebuilt Jerusalem and formed an independent region within the broader Persian Empire. The biblical texts contain a prophecy that the Jews would be punished for seventy years for their disloyalty to their Lord and cast out from their homeland. A leader chosen by the Lord would ensure their return and the completion of the prophecy. The expulsion of the Jews from Jerusalem by Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II in 586 BCE, their capture, and their subsequent return to Jerusalem under Cyrus confirmed this prediction and reinforced the Jews’ faith in the Hebrew religion.

Once Cyrus had Babylonia, he turned his focus to the rest of Assyria, the Levant, Egypt, and the Arabian Peninsula. Most kingdoms within the domains he approached either ceded to his armies or were overcome by them. Parts of Arabia and the Levant came under his control (particularly the northern sections abutting his empire). However, Persia did not gain Egypt at this time and would ultimately be conquered by Cyrus' son, Cambyses II. Cyrus the Great had established his domains up to the borders of Egypt by 535 BCE, although there is no record of the Persians invading Egypt during his reign. The Greek satrapies were divided in their allegiance to Persia. Cyrus received admiration from all of ancient Greece, but many regions of Greece were still prepared to fight against him, either to retain sovereignty of their own lands or to gain more territories by encroaching upon Persian dominions.

The Greek Xenophon (c. 430–355/354 BCE) of Athens was a military leader for the Achaemenids as well as a historian and philosopher. He was selected to command the largest and most intimidating mercenary armies of the Persians—the Ten Thousand, or the regular standing army "10,000 Immortals" of the Achaemenids. Xenophon's writings are a significant source of knowledge on the Achaemenids for historians. His works *Anabasis* and *Cyropaedia* describe his adventures as an exemplary military tactician and also posthumous accounts of the conquests of Cyrus II. Xenophon was a student and friend of the Greek philosopher Socrates (c. 470-399 BCE), and his works apparently inspired Alexander the Great and other Greeks to follow in the footsteps of the Persians' empire-building in the 4th century BCE.

Xenophon explains how the various regions of the Persian Empire were governed after the conquest, with satrapies established and administered by individuals loyal to Persia. The Persians did not attempt to alter the customs, culture, and religion of these regions, which continued to exist with a fair amount of autonomy, albeit as vassals. The governors took responsibility for the management and legislation of their realms and communicated with the Persian capitals (Babylon, Ecbatana, Pasargadae, and Susa) using the world's first official postal service instituted by Cyrus. This postal service included rest stations and fresh horses for the messengers of his prolific bureaucracy. Cyrus the Great's successes led to an age of empire-building to be followed by the Greeks and then the Romans.

Cyrus led an organized and religious court and took guidance from the Magi priests (Magians) of Zoroastrianism. There is strong evidence that Cyrus was

a practicing Zoroastrian, although some historians debate his belief system. It's possible he practiced Zoroastrianism alongside other indigenous polytheistic forms of worship. While there are many conflicting versions of Cyrus' ascension to create the Persian Empire, Greek historians agree that at some point in his youth Cyrus II spent time in Astyages' royal court in Media. Legends say that he married the daughter of the Median king, Astyages—Amytis—possibly to further legitimize his capture of the Median throne (apparently after executing her husband). However, the mother of Cyrus' son Cambyses II, who inherited his throne, was Cassadane, an Achaemenid princess, and it seems likely that Cyrus II had several wives. Cyrus and Cassadane purportedly had five children, two boys and three girls. The boys were Cambyses II and Bardiya, and the girls Atossa, Artystone, and Roxane.

Mystery surrounds Cyrus' death, and there are many versions of his demise. Herodotus explains that the king died of battle wounds after a campaign to the northeastern territories of Iran. Tired of incursions from the warring Massagetae tribe, Cyrus' troops threatened Queen Tomyris across the Iaxartes River. Tomyris' son, Spargapises, had already been killed by the Persians during an advanced ambush, and the queen vowed to get revenge on the Iranians. After the Persian king died, she apparently removed his head and dipped it in blood. Herodotus goes on to explain that when Cyrus' son, Cambyses II, succeeded his father, he recovered the body and had it interred at Pasargadae.

As Cyrus swallowed up the territories of the eastern and northeastern Iranian Plateau, his encroachment on the Massagetae produced a letter from Queen Tomyris. The contents of the letter suggest a leader that may have been more headstrong and warlike than some historical annals suggest:

"King of the Medes, I advise you to abandon this enterprise,
for you cannot know if in the end it will do you any good.
Rule your own people, and try to bear the sight of me ruling mine.
But of course you will refuse my advice;
as the last thing you wish for is to live in peace."

However, Herodotus' wild retelling of history often seems fanciful and inaccurate and serves more as a source of myth and legend than a factual account of events. The Babylonian Chronicles put the date of Cyrus the Great's death as December 530 BCE or a little before this, whereas the battle

with the Massagetae occurred six months later. Other versions of Cyrus' death include Ctesias' claim that Cyrus died while subduing a revolt among other nomadic tribes, the Derbices of Central Asia, who were assisted by troops from India. Another writer states that it was against the Dahae nomads that Cyrus fought his last battle. One source declares that Cyrus died peacefully at home at his palace in Pasargadae. But however the first ruler of the greatest empire on the earth died, his body was interned in his designated tomb at Pasargadae, which strongly resembles a miniature ziggurat. Cyrus was buried in a gold sarcophagus with his cloak, weapons, and jewels laid out on a couch adorned with purple-dye animal hides. (Cyrus' body and burial items were moved and purposefully desecrated by the Iranians when Alexander the Great attained rulership in the area. The Iranians did this to prevent the Greek conqueror from appointing himself an Iranian king using Cyrus' paraphernalia. Alexander ordered restorations on Cyrus' tomb in 324 BCE.)

In just two decades, Persia under Cyrus the Great stretched from the Aegean Sea in the west to the Iaxartes River in the northeast, north to include much of Central Asia, particularly former Assyrian lands, and southeast into Pakistan. Cyrus the Great is remembered through history as a powerful ruler, an exemplary military tactician, and an individual of high moral standing who was religiously and culturally accepting. He often adopted, or at least funded, local religions and encouraged his territories to retain their individuality. Even Cyrus' enemies respected him.

Whatever the first and greatest leader of the Persian Empire's cause of death, historians agree that his military strategies and political policies were profoundly effective because he chose to rule through altruism rather than oppression. He was hailed as a merciful and tolerant leader that established the largest empire the world had ever known, which would last for two centuries after his death. Still heralded as a hero in his native Iran, the modern-day governments continue to celebrate his life and times and refer to his memorandums, such as the Cyrus Cylinder, as instructive to the rulership of Iran.

Chapter 7-The Achaemenid Empire (550-330 BCE)

Although the ancestors of the Achaemenids, the Elamites, were not considered an independent empire after the influence of the Medians and the Persians, their culture and socio-politics would go on to inform the foundations of all future Iranian Empires. The Elamite statecraft, religion, bureaucracy, infrastructure, arts and crafts, and town planning influenced the all-powerful Achaemenid Empire to come. Capitalizing on Elam's strength and employing an abundance of Elamite scribes, the Achaemenid Empire set about conquering the largest extent of land of any empire in the known world.

The Achaemenid Empire owes its foundations to its first ruler, Cyrus II, who ironically didn't leave any clear evidence of his link to the Achaemenes clan. However, the dominance that Cyrus established ensured allegiance to the crown of Persia for centuries to come. The first king of the Persians also left a considerably well-run administrative empire that maintained the continuity of Persia as a ruling bureaucracy. Some historians argue that Cyrus II didn't actually create a new empire but simply added himself to the top position of the ruling hierarchy of his abundant kingdoms. Real and lasting imperialism within the Achaemenid Empire began in earnest with Cyrus the Great's death. Those who followed in Cyrus' footsteps needed to employ the full might of a ruling royal family and court and an imperial military to maintain and extend what Cyrus II had created.

The Greek writer Herodotus confirmed this loose arrangement of rulership before the advent of the Achaemenids. At first, Iranian powers were fluid coalitions of various Aryan tribes, with the strongest tribe dominating at particular points in history. Several rulers—such as Deioces and Cyrus II—united these tribes for the dual purposes of defending Iranian lands from savage interlopers and extending the empire's boundaries to gain more land and resources. As Herodotus explained:

"The achievement of Deioces […] was to unite under his rules the peoples of Media - Busae, Parataceni, Struchates, Arizanti, Budii, Magi. The Persian nation contains a number of tribes […]: the Pasargadae, Maraphii, and Maspii, upon which all the other tribes are dependent. Of these, the Pasargadae are the most distinguished; they contain the clan of the Achaemenids from which spring the Perseid kings. Other tribes are the Panthialaei, Derusiaei, Germanii, all of which are attached to the soil, the

remainder—the Dai, Mardi, Dropici, Sagarti, being nomadic."

Whether or not the Achaemenid Empire resulted from a legitimate imperial lineage, its legacy lasted for over two centuries, from 550 to 330 BCE. Elamite was the main administrative language for the first seventy years of this empire, and the ancient Elamite capital of Susa was rebuilt on a grand scale. The Persian Achaemenids utilized several capitals throughout their empire and changed the royal houses with each season. Susa was the winter headquarters of the Achaemenian kings from the time it was conquered by Cyrus II until the fall of the Persian Empire in 330 BCE. The city became the main Persian headquarters under Darius I (the Great), who significantly renovated the city by constructing a grand, extensive palace. It was the setting for the biblical book of Esther and the ancient Athenian play "The Persians"[55]—the oldest written and preserved theatrical play in history. Unfortunately, Darius' palace was destroyed by a fire during the reign of Artaxerxes I (465-424 BCE).

The patriarch of the Achaemenid Empire, Teispes, had two sons: Cyrus I of Anshan and Ariaramnes of Persia. While Cyrus I produced Cambyses I and subsequently Cyrus II, Ariaramnes' son was Arsames, the claimed ancestor of Darius the Great (although this lineage was never proven). Cyrus II's son, Cambyses II, was made King of Babylon eight years before his father's death. Another of his sons, Bardiya, was in control of the eastern satrapies. Herodotus wrote that upon Cambyses' ascension to the throne after Cyrus the Great's death, he assassinated his brother and proceeded to successfully invade Egypt. Cambyses II allied himself with certain Greek mercenaries and the Middle Eastern Bedouins (desert tribes) to oust Pharoah Psamtik III in 525 BCE.

Once Cambyses II had Egypt, he attempted to capture the highly-prized Mediterranean city of Carthage. Carthage was the capital of modern-day Tunisia and one of the most affluent trading cities of the classical world. However, Cambyses' Mediterranean allies, such as the Phoenicians, would not join him in conquering a city that had played such a significant role in their history. Persia's Libyan invasion also failed. A foray into Nubia (south of Egypt) was successful but was not easily sustained, and the Persians suffered heavy losses from this campaign.

In 522 BCE, the long-lost (and presumably assassinated) brother of Cambyses II, Bardiya, began taking control in Persia—or at least an imposter claiming to be Bardiya. Cambyses began the journey from Egypt to reclaim

his throne in Persia but died on the way, apparently of natural causes. The Persian heir presumptive was an individual named Gautama, also known as Smerdis, who claimed to be the deceased brother of the ruling king and a descendent of Cyrus the Great. Ctesias of Cnidus refers to this prince as Tanyoxarces and states that he was governor of the northeastern satrapies of ancient Iran.

After Cambyses II died, Smerdis (Bardiya) claimed the throne in March of 522 BCE and was officially coronated in July of the same year, according to the Behistun Inscription. However, by September of 522 BCE, Bardiya had been assassinated by Darius I in a Median stronghold called Sikayauvati. Darius insisted that the king was an imposter of the Median Magi clan. After two coups in the Persian royal family within one year, certain Median and Babylonian kingdoms revolted. After almost twenty military expeditions to quell the rebellions, Darius brought peace to the Persian Empire once again.

Darius went on to become “Darius the Great” and announced his victories on the Behistun Inscription in Media. He also expressed his loyalty to the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda. Darius emphasized his descendancy from the Achaemenids, thus legitimizing his association with the royal line. He strove to leave evidence of this family name wherever possible. (Many historians assume that this overemphasis was a suspicious act of his retroactive claim to the throne.)

The Persian Achaemenian kings left powerful evidence of their Aryan heritage and adherence to the Zoroastrian faith. Proudly carved in rock reliefs in the Zagros Mountains and on the plains of the Iranian Plateau, monuments of the ancient Iranians remain standing for all to see. At Naqsh-e-Rustam near Persepolis, four tombs of Achaemenid kings have been impressively carved into the stone hillside. King Darius I’s inscription upon his tomb posits:

“I am Darius the Great King, King of Kings, King of countries containing all kinds of people, King in this great earth far and wide, son of Hystaspes, an Achaemenian, a Persian, son of a Persian, an Aryan, having Aryan lineage… By the grace of Ahura Mazda.”

[8] Three of the four rock relief-cut tombs at Naqsh-e Rustam (Rostam). Below the tombs can be seen the bas-relief carvings of later kings in their ceremonial poses. Note the size of the reliefs in comparison to the people below.

Thirteen kings appear on the Achaemenid king's list, starting with Cyrus II. The kings succeeded through the male line. After Cambyses II, who ruled for eight years (r. c. 530-22 BCE), and Bardiya (r. c. 522 BCE), the lineage of Darius I (r. c. 522-486 BCE) took over. Following Darius the Great was Xerxes I (r. c. 486-465 BCE) and then Artaxerxes I (r. c. 465-424 BCE). Three sons of Artaxerxes ruled in quick succession: Xerxes II (r. c. 424 BCE), Sogdianus (r. c. 424-423 BCE), and then Darius II (r. c. 423-404 BCE). The Achaemenid king line continued through Darius II. His son, Artaxerxes II (r. c. 404-358 BCE) was followed by his son Artaxerxes III (r. c. 358-338 BCE) and then Artaxerxes IV (r. c. 338-336 BCE). The final king of the Persian Achaemenids, Darius III, was the nephew or distant cousin of Artaxerxes III. He ruled from c. 336 to 330 BCE.

During Darius the Great's thirty-six-year rule, he built a new capital at Persepolis and reinforced the centralized satrapy governance system instituted by Cyrus. Darius was instrumental in creating Persian highways and roads throughout the empire, or at least maintaining and extending the thoroughfares of his forebears. The Royal Road from Sardis in Lydia to Susa was the most famous on the Indo-European continent. He was dedicated to infrastructure projects and specifically focused on Persepolis and Susa. But Darius did more than build: he put considerable effort into adorning his palaces with artwork and colorful rock reliefs. This artwork not only decorated his numerous abodes but also served as message boards of his

reign, heritage, conquests, and adherence to his religion.

With respect to his palace at Susa, Darius refers to *"cedar timber from Lebanon, yaka-timber from Gandara and Carmania, gold from Sardis and Bactria, lapis-lazuli and carnelian from Sogdia, turquoise from Chorasmia, silver and ebony from Egypt, ornamentation from Ionia, ivory from Ethiopia, Sind, and Arachosia."* Stonemasons, gold and metalsmiths, bricklayers, artists, and woodcarvers were also brought from all around the empire. The Persian palaces were remarkable and beautiful cultural replicas of the kingdoms the empire represented, yet curiously, the overall effect was uniquely Persian.

[9] A rock relief from Susa showing two sphinxes with soldiers' heads and the Zoroastrian Faravahar (winged deity).

Persepolis, or Takht-e Jamshid, was located at the foot of the Mountain of Mercy (Kuh-e Rahmat). Its magnificent ruins suggest a palace of such splendor that it is difficult to imagine what it may have been like. Alexander the Great burnt the capital in 330 BCE in retaliation for the burning of Athens a hundred and fifty years earlier. Darius the Great began constructing the palace in 518 BCE upon a huge manmade terrace. As successive Persian kings added palatial buildings to the terrace, Persepolis grew to include the Apadana Palace (hypostyle hall) and the Throne Hall of a hundred columns, among other structures. The Throne Hall was brilliantly decorated and approached via a series of stairways designed to lead people ceremonially toward the Persian king within the hall.

The Gate of All Nations, built later by Xerxes I at Persepolis, is an impressive pillared receiving room with a pair of massive Assyrian bulls guarding the entrance. (These bull figures are the Iranian Lamassu creatures

discussed in chapter thirteen: Religion and Myths.) Statues and carved reliefs adorned the Persepolis complex, and gardens filled the spaces between buildings. A wealth of archaeological finds and artifacts were discovered at Persepolis, including many administrative texts. At the Palace of Apadana a hoard of coins as well as silver and gold textual foundation tablets were uncovered. The foundation tablets—meant for reproducing official depositions—contained trilingual language inscriptions.

[10] Two images of the ruins of Persepolis. The first image of the Tachara Palace and the second of the hypostyle hall.

Among other things, these texts describe the Persian's rigorous adherence to the concept of *truth*. Telling a lie (*druj*) was considered the greatest wickedness of society and could be punishable by death. Despite the assassinations and intrigues that would come to plague the royal houses during the Persian dynasties, this application of the truth appeared to continue. The most noteworthy milestone of Darius I's reign is that during his rulership, the Persian Empire included all the ancient Iranian/Aryan nations listed in the Avesta. The Avesta was the earliest sacred manuscript of Zoroastrianism.

The origins of Zoroastrianism and the degree of the religion's influence in Persia are not precisely known. In approximately 1,800 BCE, a prophet of the Zoroastrian deity Ahura Mazda, Zarathustra (Zarthushtra or Zoroaster), emerged from the northeastern plateau of Iran to spread the message of good versus evil. Zarathustra stressed righteousness and truth and was a prophet fighting for the souls of humankind, desperate to save them from misdeeds. The Avesta was written in the Avestan language, an early branch of the Indo-Iranian languages. Although the earliest surviving text of the Avesta dates from the Sasanian period (or approximately the 3rd to 7th centuries CE), it is believed to be a compendium of much earlier works.

Over a millennium after the life of Zarathustra, the kings of the Achaemenes

adhered to the teachings of Zoroaster since they believed that they'd been placed on the throne and gained their kingdoms through the power of Ahura Mazda. It is impossible to know to what degree the Persian kings subscribed to the Zoroastrian belief system except by the evidence left on stone artwork and inscriptions in the ancient palaces and mausoleums and on the ancient roads. Certainly, the kings Cyrus the Great, Darius the Great, and Xerxes I left evidence of a strong religious faith in Zoroastrianism, but by the reign of Artaxerxes II, this worship was becoming diluted.

Whatever the kings of Persia believed in, it was coupled with rigorous adherence to the conquest of new territories. Darius I had capable generals such as Mardonius (a nephew of Darius), who extended the empire to Macedonia and Libya in the west, Pakistan in the east, the Persian Gulf in the south, and the Caucus Mountains to the north. There is also evidence that Darius the Great added northwestern India to his lands. Since not even subsequent empires could sufficiently penetrate the Indian subcontinent, this is assumed to be the Indus River Valley area.

Greece had always been a slippery vassal of Persia. Over time, the various provinces of Persia's most western European extent changed repeatedly. In 498 BCE, Athens supported the Ionian cities in a revolt. It took four years to quell the rebellion and many resources. However, a counterattack on mainland Greece in 490 BCE ended at Marathon.

During the reign of Darius the Great's son, Xerxes I, the Persian Empire reached its greatest geographical extent—even larger than that of Cyrus the Great. Using the largest army the world had ever known, Xerxes swallowed up most of Greece, including Sparta, but also experienced losses through his failure to hold Macedonia and Thrace. Xerxes punished the stubbornness of Athens and Sparta in 480 BCE at the Battle of Thermopylae, sacking the cities and finally taking them as part of Persia. But the Greeks had never been prepared to relent entirely to the might of Persia. They won a crucial naval battle in 480 BCE in the Straits of Salamis known as the Battle of Salamis. The entire period from 499-449 BCE included the "Greco-Persian Wars," during which Persia and Greece were at each other's throats in the constant throws of gaining and losing territory in the Mediterranean and western Asia.

Xerxes' constant warring with the western territories resulted in rebellions in other kingdoms. In 479 BCE, he needed to leave Greece to deal with an uprising in Babylon. The Persians successfully subdued Babylon, but in the meantime, the army that the Persian king had left behind in Greece was

defeated at the *Battle of Plataea* in the same year. Due to the exertion of attempting to maintain Greece, Xerxes allowed the eastern territories of Taxila (Indus River Valley) and Gandara (northern Pakistan) to detach from the empire during his reign.

The classical writers described a Persian royal court of moral degeneration, lavish excesses, corruption, and political and sexual intrigue. Although Persia was still the most powerful force in the region, it seemed to be deteriorating from within. Xerxes was assassinated by his own bodyguard, Artabanus, who intended to create a new royal house with his own sons. He attempted to pin the murder on Xerxes' oldest son, Darius, whom he also murdered. Eventually, Xerxes' other son, Artaxerxes, deposed Artabanus and his sons and reclaimed the Achaemenid throne with the help of a general, Megabyzus (Megabazus).

Historians have suggested that without Megabyzus' assistance, the Achaemenid dynasty might have ended with Xerxes. He had been an instrumental general in Darius the Great's army and led a significant campaign against the Scythians in 513 BCE. Afterward, Megabyzus was posted to Greece, where he made significant inroads by gaining gold-rich Thrace and several other regions surrounding Turkey and Greece. Megabyzus proved himself to be a loyal servant of the Achaemenid clan and ensured the perpetuation of the lineage for another 135 years.

Even though Xerxes I's reign was cut short for unknown reasons, he managed to keep most of the Persian Empire together for the duration of his two-decade reign. His two successors, Artaxerxes I (forty-one-year reign) and Darius II (nineteen-year reign) similarly maintained the might of Persia. For a century and a half, the Achaemenids had retained hold over the greatest empire the world had ever seen. But, by about the 4th century BCE, civil wars began to erupt between Artaxerxes II (Darius II's successor) and his younger brother, "Cyrus the Younger," who had been put in charge of the satrapies of Lydia and Iona. Cyrus the Younger employed an army of Greek mercenaries (including the Greek writer Xenophon) to overthrow his brother, but he was ultimately defeated in Babylonia at Cunaxa in 401 BCE, where he died.

During Artaxerxes II's reign, Egypt successfully detached from the Persian Empire. Artaxerxes II had the longest reign of any of the Persian kings (forty-six years) and is described by the Greco-Roman writers as brave and fair-minded. During his time. the Achaemenids took the opportunity to maintain their hold on Greece by "dividing and conquering" the various regions of

their western provinces, such as Athens, Sparta, and Thebes. Despite the Persian's best efforts, and with the use of Greek mercenaries, they were unable to retake Egypt until 342/1 BCE. With the help of two generals of King Artaxerxes III (Bagoas[56] and Mentor of Rhodes[57]), the last independent Pharoah of Egypt, Nectanebo II, fled.

Artaxerxes III, who had ruled for two decades, was assassinated, and his son, Artaxerxes IV, was crowned in his stead. But Artaxerxes IV ruled for only two years before being deposed and replaced with Darius III—a more distant relative (possibly a second cousin). With the ascendancy of an indirect descendant to the throne, the empire had several internal rebellions. At the same time, the Greek conqueror, Alexander III of Macedonia ("the Great"), was making inroads into the Persian Empire.

As Alexander made inroads into Asia Minor, Darius III sent out his Greek mercenary leader, Memnon of Rhodes (Mentor of Rhodes' brother), along with Persian commander Pharnabazus III[58] to stop Alexander. The Persians reached Assyria but were defeated by the Greek armies at Issus in 333 BCE. The Persians managed to recover and rebuild an army, but Alexander was intent on creating an empire even larger than that of the Persians. A final battle at Gaugamela (modern-day Iraq) saw to Alexander's conquest of Persia. Meanwhile, Darius III was murdered by one of his own generals, Bessus, who promptly proclaimed himself Artaxerxes V. Bessus was killed by Alexander, who had every intention of taking the Persian throne for himself. The demise of the final king of the expansive Achaemenid Empire in 330 BCE ended more than two centuries of a mighty and virtually uncontested empire. Alexander continued as head of the previously Persian territories.

The Achaemenid Empire left the longest-lasting Persian legacy that still exists within Iran's government and national sovereignty today. When Alexander the Great fought his way through the empire, he showed considerable solidarity and loyalty to Persia, despite the intrigues of the Persian royal court. Many aspects of Persian culture and society held firm during the Achaemenid dynasty and continued well after the fall of the Achaemenids. Cyrus the Great's standard, the Shahbaz ("Royal Falcon"), in the image of a mythical eagle linked to the Faravahar (winged deity) of Zoroastrianism, was used throughout the empire in various ways and lasted as a bastion of the royal house.

The Achaemenid society was a multicultural collection of the various

kingdoms of the entire empire. Even the rock reliefs depicted the Persian kings receiving tribute or support from many tribes of varying ethnicities. Cultural interchanges within the empire meant that purely Persian influences have been found throughout the extent of the empire, but foreign cultural influences also reached right into the palaces of Iran. It is almost impossible for archaeologists to differentiate between artifacts of the various kingdoms or to ascertain which culture was most influential since the Persian Empire was, in essence, a melting pot of civilizations.

Although the official language of the Persian Empire was generally Aramaic, several languages were used and accepted as mainstream—Akkadian (Babylonian), Median, Old Persian, and Elamite. Written languages were rarer, particularly since few ancient languages had a literate version of the spoken words. The oldest and best example of written communication on a mass scale was Darius' inscription in Media, composed in Old Persian, Babylonian, and Elamite. The lingua franca of the empire became a type of Imperial Aramaic that was both a written and spoken language used almost exclusively within the territories. This official form of Aramaic had originated among the Semitic tribes of ancient Assyria and was the basis of public life and administration. The Persians occasionally used Greek as their administrative language, particularly for correspondence, because it was a significant international dialect of the time. While many people employed within the realm were Greek, there is no evidence that Greek ever became a mainstream language of Persia.

The Persians venerated their ruling elites and entertained large audience halls from which to conduct the daily royal business. They were fond of feasts, puddings, festivities, and particularly wine, which became a staple of nighttime celebrations and during the workday. The Persian society was very hierarchical. Royalty and military formed the upper echelons, followed by magi and other spiritual advisors. The laborers and agriculturalists provided the lowest foundation of their culture. The king surrounded himself with family, courtiers, military personnel, noblemen, religious functionaries, and the empire's administrative bureaucracy. Susa was the center of political life, although Ecbatana was mostly habited in summer and Persepolis in spring. Babylon was occupied on occasion.

Persian male subjects were required to serve terms in the regular army, with greater numbers of recruits gathered for larger campaigns. A permanent and formidable standing army consisting mostly of Persians and Medes (those

most loyal to the crown) was the “Immortal 10,000.” One thousand of these immortals served as personal guards to the king at all times. The key to the power struggles within the Persian royal circles came down to the individual that best controlled the ten thousand. He who controlled the immortal army controlled Persia and could snatch the throne—legitimately or not.

The immortals were a heavy infantry army whose troops were immediately replaced if killed or wounded so that a static number of this elite guard remained. They wore bronze breastplates and helmets, and their horses were similarly attired in full bronze armor (barding). Their scale-armored coats and abundance of weapons such as daggers, bows and arrows, spears, and slings would have made an intimidating sight. Rock relief images show the immortals with Persian tiaras (metal circlets on the crown of the head perhaps attached to cloths to keep out the sun and dust) bedecked with jewelry, but it is uncertain whether the immortals wore this decoration in battle.

The regular army was divided into units according to infantry, bowmen, and cavalry and was commanded by Persians or else those extremely loyal to Persia. Military colonies remained in situ at strategic points throughout the empire to maintain order, such as at Elephantine in Egypt and Babylon. Greek mercenaries became a permanent part of the Persian army, particularly in the later generations of the Achaemenids, as they were keen to fight for Persian silver.

Persian kings kept large harems of concubines, often foreign women who could not marry into the royal family. The kings’ wives, and sometimes families, were very much a part of his everyday life, even joining the sovereign on military campaigns and other expeditions abroad. There is much evidence that aristocratic women received good educations, even in typically ancient male pursuits such as horse riding and archery. They also conducted their own business and controlled their own servants, households, money, and lands. It is evident that Persian women, particularly the elites, lived with a high degree of independence.

Certain female members of the royal family are known to have held considerable influence over affairs of the state, although they never ruled ostensibly. Atossa (c. 550-475 BCE) was the daughter of Cyrus the Great, who married her brother, Cambyses II. She later went on to marry Darius the Great and produce Xerxes I. Throughout her various roles at court, Atossa was instrumental in influencing the decisions and actions of the rulers to whom she was related.

Another example is Parysatis of the 5th century, and daughter of Artaxerxes I. She was a half-sister to Xerxes II, Sogdiana, and Darius II, whom she married. Parysatis produced an abundance of children and thirteen sons. Two of the four who survived to adulthood were Artaxerxes II and Cyrus the Younger. Ctesias was Parysatis' physician at court, and records how she ran a prodigious network of spies and conducted executions to achieve her ends, which included putting the illegitimate Darius II on the throne. Parysatis was an extremely powerful and wealthy woman in her own right and was the power behind the throne to Darius II. When her husband died, she pushed her favorite son, Cyrus the Younger, towards the throne, although it wasn't his by right. She may have been the reason he raised an army against his brother and the rightful heir, Artaxerxes II.

By 330 BCE, Alexander the Great had captured most of the previous territories of the Achaemenids. After this emperor's untimely death seven years later in 323 BCE, his domains defaulted into three parts: the Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt, the Macedonian Kingdom, and the Seleucid Empire of Asia. The Seleucid domains were technically a continuation of the Persian Empire. Its leader, Seleucid, would continue the ambitions of his Greek and Persian forebears by attempting to gain the immense subcontinent of India. But it wouldn't be long before the Iranian ruling families of the central Iranian Plateau, the Parthians, would rise to reclaim their ancient lands.

Chapter 8 – The Seleucid Empire of Ancient Iran

Alexander III, "the Great" (356-323 BCE), was the ruler of the Macedonian (Greek) royal dynasty, the Argeads (or Temenids). He had ascended the throne at the age of twenty and immediately proceeded to acquire the Persian Empire. But Alexander was even more ambitious than the Persians: he also wanted most of northern Africa, Arabia, India, and China. Alexander didn't leave any children (his wife was pregnant at his death), and his unexpected demise at the age of thirty-two in Babylon could possibly have been an assassination by poisoning.[59] As in the other imperial royal houses of the era, assassination was common. Alexander had pushed his troops to the point of rebellion on many occasions and was not entirely popular.

Naturally, Alexander's death resulted in significant squabbles between his family and generals to decide who was in charge of the empire. A series of internal civil wars erupted, and there were decades of confusion and infighting until his domains were settled into four relatively stable regions. The four regions eventually came under the control of noblemen of Macedonia or powerful men who had been contemporaries of Alexander or generals of his armies. Three of these regions were: Ptolemaic (Lagid) Egypt ruled by the Greek Ptolemy dynasty (305-30 BCE), Antigonid Macedonia ruled by the Greek dynasty of the same name from 306 to 168 BCE, and the Kingdom of Pergamon of western Asia Minor ruled by the Greek Attalid dynasty. The fourth region was the Seleucid Empire (312-63 BCE), founded by a prominent general of Alexander's former armies, Seleucus I Nicator.[60]

Alexander's march across the territories he conquered resulted in the Hellenization of these regions—the spread of Greek culture to previously Persian areas. With the rise of the Roman Empire (27 BCE-395 CE) towards the end of the 1st century BCE, the Roman culture simply replaced the Greek across the expanse of Alexander's classical world. (The Roman Empire was followed by the non-imperial, church-controlled, but still Hellenized Byzantine Empire of 395-1453 CE.) Although Alexander had not fulfilled his dream of "conquering the world," he had opened up previously Persian lands to the influences of the Mediterranean cultures.

Seleucus I Nicator (c. 358-281 BCE) was one of the "Diadochi," or successors of Alexander's empire, who had taken responsibility for administering the territories after the Greek emperor's death. The "Wars of the Diadochi" lasted from 322 to 281 BCE as the rival successors and their

families and allies fought for control of the conquered Persian territories. The most significant of these wars for ancient Iran were the Babylonian War, fought from 311 to 309, and the Battle of Ipsus in 301 BCE. Seleucus was the victor, thus sealing the fate of classical Iran. (There were four official Diadochian Wars with a further five significant engagements.)

[11] A silver coin with Seleucus' profile, c. 304-294 BCE.

Alexander the Great had fought three decisive battles with the Persians to finally capture their kingdoms. The first was at Granicus in Turkey in 334 BCE, the second at Issus in Anatolia in 333 BCE, and the final battle at Gaugamela in 331 BCE. (Gaugamela in the ancient Mesopotamian River basin is about a thousand kilometers, or 620 miles, west of modern-day Tehran.) Alexander then marched his troops south to Susa and Persepolis and entered the plateau of the capitals of the kings of Persia through the "Persian Gates," a pass through the Zagros Mountains.

Both Persian cities surrendered without a fight. Alexander then passed through the ancient capital of Pasargadae to visit the tomb of his icon, Cyrus the Great. His final stop was the Persian capital of Ecbatana, to which Darius III had escaped. In the meantime, Bessus had arranged for Darius III's murder and then escaped north, raising an army as he went. When Alexander finally caught up with Bessus, appalled at Bessus' treatment of the Persian Empire and its last remaining kings, he ordered a horrible execution for the disloyal general.

Alexander's respect for the Persian Empire was evident after he took power. He sought to maintain the kingdoms in the ordered and peaceful manner of the Achaemenid kings. Alexander even married one of Darius III's daughters, Stateira II, and Artaxerxes III's daughter, Parysatis II, for political reasons.

For this, he is often heralded as “the last of the Achaemenid kings.”

Seleucus I Nicator had fought alongside Alexander as one of his most stalwart generals but was not powerful enough to initially be considered a Diadochi. After Alexander’s death, Seleucus didn’t naturally inherit any of the former Greek territories, but after a series of conspiracies and battles within the Diadochi, Seleucus eventually gained Babylon as a satrap in 320 BCE. However, this position was tenuous. He was ousted at the end of the Second Diadochi War, only to return in 312 BCE with the help of the Egyptian king, Ptolemy I Soter, to conquer Babylon as his own. Seleucus’ conquest of Babylon marked the start of the Seleucid Empire. (In the eight-year interim period, Seleucus was caught up in the Wars of the Diadochi and spent most of this time in Egypt under the protection of Ptolemy.)

But, during the Wars of the Diadochi, Seleucus had made a considerable enemy of Antigonus, ruler of the Macedonian kingdoms. Antigonus I Monophthalmus (382-301 BCE), the “one-eyed,” had been a loyal general of the Argead dynasty of Macedonia. Antigonus became the most powerful player in the Diadochi Wars and pronounced himself king of Macedonia in 306 BCE, thus beginning the Argead lineage of rulers. He was an extraordinarily large man who had lost an eye in battle. His successor and son, Demetrius I (337-283 BCE), was also a remarkably big man. Antigonus had been continually opposed to Seleucus inheriting Babylon or any of Alexander’s former empire. He maneuvered his way into the dominant position of power in Greece, making allies of the other Diadochi, including Seleucus’ former compatriot, Ptolemy.

The Peace of the Dynasts was signed in 311 BCE at the end of the three-year-long Third War of the Diadochi. The peace treaty included all the Diadochi but Seleucus; this was presumably a strategy to oust Seleucus entirely. Antigonus’ aimed to hold the west in order to conquer Seleucus in the east and prevent him from either holding Babylon or acquiring more power and land in Asia. But history suggests that Seleucus was relatively popular with the surrounding tribes and may have had further support from ancient clans such as the Kassites. The Babylonian population was also hostile towards Antigonus and his troops, and Seleucus was fighting on “home turf” that had been hard-won.

From 311-309 BCE, Antigonus and his son Demetrius waged a series of unsuccessful wars against Seleucid Babylon, known as the Babylonian War. It is the most obscure Hellenic battle, and the facts are unclear and confusing.

The events of the Babylonian War seem to be that Antigonus and Demetrius came to occupy Babylon on a few occasions while Seleucus wisely remained at large within the Zagros Mountains. A final battle ensued, although the location and date of this standoff are unknown. A legend explains that the armies fought for one full day and then rested at night. Seleucus' troops slept in their armor with their weapons and so were ready far earlier than the Macedonian troops the next day. When the battle resumed, the Seleucus' troops took them by surprise, winning the battle.

It is only because of the final actions of the participants that historians can conclude that the war ended with Seleucus as the victor. Antigonus withdrew to rule west of Babylon (he also controlled Assyria at this time), and the Seleucid Empire continued east from Babylon. If Seleucus had lost the Babylonian War, his empire would have collapsed and been swallowed up by the Diadochi—and yet it held firm.

Evidence suggests that the Iranians wholeheartedly supported Seleucus against his Macedonian enemies. Seleucus moved uncontested through the former Persian Empire and proceeded to capture more of the Achaemenid lands, including Mesopotamia, Iran, and parts of Pakistan and India. (Assyria would become his after the Battle of Ipsus.) From 311 to 302 BCE, Seleucus gained the entirety of the former eastern Persian Empire. His rampant ambitions included an attempt to penetrate India beyond the Indus River Valley, where he was mightily repulsed by the first ruler of the Maurya Empire (322-185 BCE), Chandragupta.

[12] The extent of the Seleucid Empire, showing the Ptolemaic Empire, Parthia, Greco-Bactrian territory, and the Mauryan Empire.

The Seleucid-Mauryan War of 305-303 BCE was ultimately a defeat for Seleucus. Recognizing the power of the Seleucid Empire, Indian Emperor Chandragupta Maurya (r. c. 324-297 BCE) brokered a peace deal. Seleucid offered one of his daughters in marriage to Chandragupta and received five hundred war elephants in return. Although Seleucus had not gained India, he had secured the eastern border of the Indus River. Chandragupta allowed Seleucus to have influence in the lands of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Indus but technically annexed them to India, thus also securing the northwestern border of the Indian subcontinent. (This arrangement also considerably bolstered Seleucid-Indian trade relations, facilitating the Silk Road.)

Seleucus now controlled the largest empire after that of Alexander the Great, and this reality reinforced the enmity between himself and the Diadochi of the west. As Antigonus' attention remained in the west, he was unaware of how truly powerful Seleucus was becoming and that his armies and resources were burgeoning. Also, the Indian emperor's gift of elephants to the Seleucid Empire included elephant trainers/riders, or *mahouts*. This force of war beasts would prove instrumental in the Seleucid Empire's final battle to assert its domains.

This Battle of Ipsus (Ipsos) in 301 BCE was the most defining battle in Seleucus' era of the Wars of the Diadochi and part of the Fourth Diadochi War (begun in 307 BCE). It unfolded in Phrygia in modern-day Central Turkey and involved several Diadochi, who had rerouted themselves from battles around the Mediterranean to strike at the Seleucid Empire. Antigonus and his son were ultimately defeated by the Diadochi Seleucus, Lysimachus, [61] and Cassander,[62] plus a few other commanders of "the allies." (Ptolemy chose not to get involved but started a ruckus in Assyria to detract Antigonus from the battle, or so he claimed.)

Several Greco-Roman sources provide events of the Battle of Ipsus retrospectively. Plutarch[63] and Diodorus are two of these. Diodorus of Sicily (c. 90-30 BCE) was a Greek historian who wrote the *Bibliotheca historica* (Historical Library), a compendium of history reaching from Greece's mythological past until the death of Diodorus. The *Bibliotheca historica* was essentially a collection of other writers' works. From these sources, we know that Seleucus' son, Antiochus, also joined the Battle of Ipsus, as well as a

large army that rivaled Antigonus' 80,000 men—including the war elephants from Chandragupta. Plutarch claimed that Antigonus had seventy-five elephants to Seleucus' four hundred. The Seleucids also had 120 Scythian chariots, possibly manned by Scythians themselves. Most of the soldiers on both sides were infantrymen, with approximately 10,000 cavalrymen under Antigonus and 15,000 under Seleucid.

The Greek custom of fighting was well known. The infantrymen were called hoplites and carried large, round, heavy shields (the *aspis*) that were deeply curved to protect the carrier. These foot soldiers wore helmets and armor on their torsos and legs (*panoply*). The hoplites also carried short swords and spears and were often trained to fight in a battle formation known as the *phalanx*. The phalanx was a closely packed formation of soldiers who fought as a single unit. The shield of one man held in his left arm protected the right side of the man next to him. They put their heads down and fought in long parallel lines as an impenetrable wall.

Greek fighting was very effective, but at the Battle of Ipsus, Antigonus' army split when Demetrius led a cavalry charge at Antiochus. Antigonus' army was left vulnerable, and a portion of them surrendered when faced with Seleucus' army. (Technically, this was a Greek-on-Greek battle, and it couldn't have been easy for the armies to face one another or take other Greek lives.) Demetrius couldn't get back to the battlefield past the enemy's war elephants. Antigonus was killed by a hail of spears from Seleucus' foot soldiers, and Demetrius retreated north, knowing that the battle was lost.

The assassination of eight-one-year-old Antigonus is noteworthy and shows a hatred of this Diadochus by the Greeks. Antigonus has been described as a headstrong and bloodthirsty leader who eroded the lands of his dynasty through malice and greed rather than from any noble cause. (He had been determined to take all of Alexander's former empire back as his own.) His poorly calculated and unwarranted attacks on the Seleucid Empire would ultimately weigh heavily on his son's political standing and territories.

The Battle of Ipsus was the most defining battle of the Wars of the Diadochi. It marked the end of the fourth of four official periods of warring to determine the territories of the Diadochi. After Ipsus, the Antigonid Empire lost many lands to Seleucus and the other allies. The Seleucid Empire gained northern Assyria and eastern Anatolia. But by 281 BCE, Seleucus had turned on his former ally, Lysimachus, who'd helped him defeat Antigonus. (After Ipsus, Lysimachus had gained Lydia, Ionia, Phrygia, and northern Asia

Minor.) Lysimachus' personal situation at court, including intrigues, deceptions, and interfamilial murders, had sent some of his close kin fleeing to Seleucus for safety. Seleucus took the opportunity to invade Western Asia with the idea of then gaining the European lands of the former Persian Empire. In 281 BCE, Lysimachus met Seleucus at the Battle of Corupedium (near Sardis) in Lydia but was killed. (Corupedium was the final battle of the Diadochi.)

After the Battle of Corupedium, Seleucus I Nicator was the unlikely nominal ruler of all of Alexander the Great's former territories except for Ptolemaic Egypt. But as Seleucus made his way west to take Macedonia, he was assassinated by Ptolemy II Keraunos, the son of Ptolemy I. (Ptolemy II Keraunos had been involved in the deadly court intrigues in Macedonia.) Ptolemy II then seized the Macedonian throne[64] while his younger brother, Ptolemy II Philadelphus, ascended the Ptolemaic throne in Egypt.

The sons of the Diadochi continued a seemingly never-ending battle over the former territories of Alexander the Great. Invading tribes from northern Europe and Asia added to the general turmoil of former Persian territories. The Seleucid Empire began to fragment, and large independent kingdoms reformulated themselves for the first time since before the Achaemenid era and Cyrus the Great. Still, the Hellenistic culture had reached far and permanently into the eastern dominions of ancient Iran, to the extent that by 180 BCE, the Greco-Bactrians invaded northwestern India to form the Indo-Greek Kingdoms. (Greco-Bactria was a breakaway region of the former Bactria but ruled by independent Greek officials.)

After both the Babylonian War and the Battle of Ipsus, Seleucus had taken the opportunity to define and reinforce the boundaries of his empire by building several capitals.[65] Two of these were Seleucia and Antioch. Antioch (named after Seleucus' son) on the Orontes River was built near the modern-day city of Antakya, Turkey, between the Mediterranean Sea and Syria. Antioch became a powerful and pivotal city connecting the trade routes, political regions, and the royal roads of ancient Persia. Antioch grew so significant that it began to rival the metropolis of Alexandria in Egypt. The Seleucid dynasty held Antioch until 63 BCE, when it was lost to the Romans. Antioch became the main capital of the Seleucid Empire over former Mesopotamian centers, such as Babylon, and the later Seleucia.[66]

Seleucia, or Seleucia-on-Tigris, was constructed north of Babylon in the Tigris-Euphrates River Basin, after which Seleucid encouraged it as the

destination of the royal house rather than Babylon. The city mostly attracted Greeks, Assyrians, and Jews. A tablet dating from 275 BCE described how most of the city of Babylon was transported to Seleucus' new Mesopotamian capital built at the confluence where a canal from the Euphrates River joined the Tigris River. It appears that Seleucus was foresighted enough to know that the politics of battles only gained a ruler the seat, whereas it was economics that maintained imperial power over the long term. In both Antioch and Seleucia, Seleucus had primary and active control of the major Near East trade routes. (Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, and Seleucia became the largest and most populous cities of their era, with the major Seleucid cities having over 600,000 inhabitants at certain times.)

But Seleucus' days would not end in peace, and his complicated relationship with Ptolemy extended beyond their eras and into the lives of their successors. Ptolemy (I Soter) had taken the opportunity to gain much Assyrian territory while Seleucus was warring with Antigonus from 311-301 BCE. Once Seleucus and his allies had won at Ipsus, Seleucus was technically awarded Coele-Syria. Coele-Syria was a politically, and therefore militarily, strategic piece of ground that stretched from the Middle East and Arabia in the west into southern Mesopotamia in the east (including modern-day Syria and Lebanon). As the main access route to the eastern Mediterranean and Egypt, it was a highly prized domain of the Hellenistic world. Ptolemy had snatched Coele-Syria while the other Diadochi were otherwise engaged, but Seleucus did nothing during his lifetime to regain the territory because of Ptolemy's assistance in creating Seleucid Empire. However, the heirs of the two empires would proceed to fight over Coele-Syria for a hundred years.

From 274 BCE to 168 BCE, a series of six long wars known as the Syrian Wars raged between the Seleucid Empire and the Ptolemaic dynasty. (Technically, the Syrian Wars were sparked by Seleucus I Nicator's death in 281 BCE.) These wars exhausted the resources of both the Ptolemaic and the Seleucid Empires, making them vulnerable to invasions from the Romans and Parthians, respectively. It was about the time of the third set of Syrian Wars (246-241 BCE) that Parthia overran the former Iranian Empire, taking back the Zagros Mountains and the Iranian Plateau from the Seleucid Empire.

The Seleucid Empire only dominated ancient Iran for about sixty-five years, but it remained a regional power for a lot longer, only relinquishing its hold

with the rise of Rome. The greatest difference between the Greek and Iranian rulers was their style of rulership. While the Achaemenids had naturally been a part of the Iranian civilization and intermarried locally, the Greeks remained aloof and separate from the Iranians. Except for the Seleucid founder, Seleucus, who had married a Persian princess, the ruling elite of the Seleucid Empire didn’t marry into the Iranian culture and concentrated at strategic ruling cities where they continued a Hellenistic way of life.

During the Seleucid Empire, the capitals of ancient Iran drew many Greeks into their Hellenized epicenters. Local customs were tolerated and sometimes even adopted by the immigrants. Some historians go further to claim that under the Seleucids, the former Persian Empire experienced a true blending of west and east, with the Hellenes simply adding a new layer of bureaucracy to the ancient layers of administration that had come before. There certainly aren’t indications that the Seleucids were tyrannical in their rulership, and Persian life would have continued relatively normally under the Seleucids as well as the Parthians that were to replace them.

Chapter 9-The Parthian Empire (247 BCE-224 CE)

Parthia was an ancient region of Iran, presumably settled during the Aryan immigration. Its geographical area equates approximately to the modern-day Khorāsān (Khurasan) Province of Iran, as well as parts of southern Turkmenistan and northern Afghanistan. Parthia was formed by the natural geographic borders of the Elburz Mountains to the west separating it from Media, the Dasht-e Kavir desert to its south, and the Kopet Dag Mountain range to the north. (The Kopet Dag was the range abutting the eastern end of the Alborz Mountains north of Media.) Other ancient kingdoms surrounded Media: Hyrcania to the northwest, Margiana to the northeast, and Aria[67] to the east. Margiana was a minor satrapy of Bactria, which along with Hyrcania, were both satrapies of the various Iranian Empires through history. However, like all the tribal kingdoms associated with ancient Iran, the boundaries of their lands changed considerably with each new empire or dynasty.

With the fragmentation of the Seleucid Empire, various states simultaneously asserted their independence. Bactria and Sogdiana reformulated under the breakaway Greek ruler, Diodotus I Soter (c. 315/300-235 BCE), who became the first Greek king of Bactria. Diodotus ruled for one or two decades before his death, but the Diodotid-Bactrian (Greco-Bactrian) Kingdom he left behind survived in one form or another until the early part of the first century of the Common Era. Diodotus inherited his Bactrian kingdom from his father, who had been a dignitary of Alexander the Great. Some records claim that Diodotus I Soter's father was a nephew of Seleucus I Nicator, which enabled his father to secure the considerable satrapy of Bactria as governor of the Seleucid Empire.

The Latin historian and writer Justin, who lived during the Roman Empire in approximately the 2nd century CE, describes how the Romans and Parthians divided up the world once they had come into power as the primary empires of their time. With regards to the creation of the Greco-Bactrian kingdom, in the *Epitome of Pompeius Trogus*, Justin writes:

"Diodotus, the governor of the thousand cities of Bactria, defected and proclaimed himself king; all the other people of the Orient followed his example and seceded from the Macedonians [the Seleucids]."

In general, the historical writers of the classical Mediterranean, who wrote after the events of ancient Iran occurred, have conflicting versions of events

that are almost impossible to correlate. The dates of events are particularly confusing, and modern historians have needed to use astronomical and other data to verify timelines. The Greek writer Arrian wrote a Parthian history (*Parthica*) that was lost. It is only through references to the Parthian history by other writers that we know of this compendium of seventeen books.

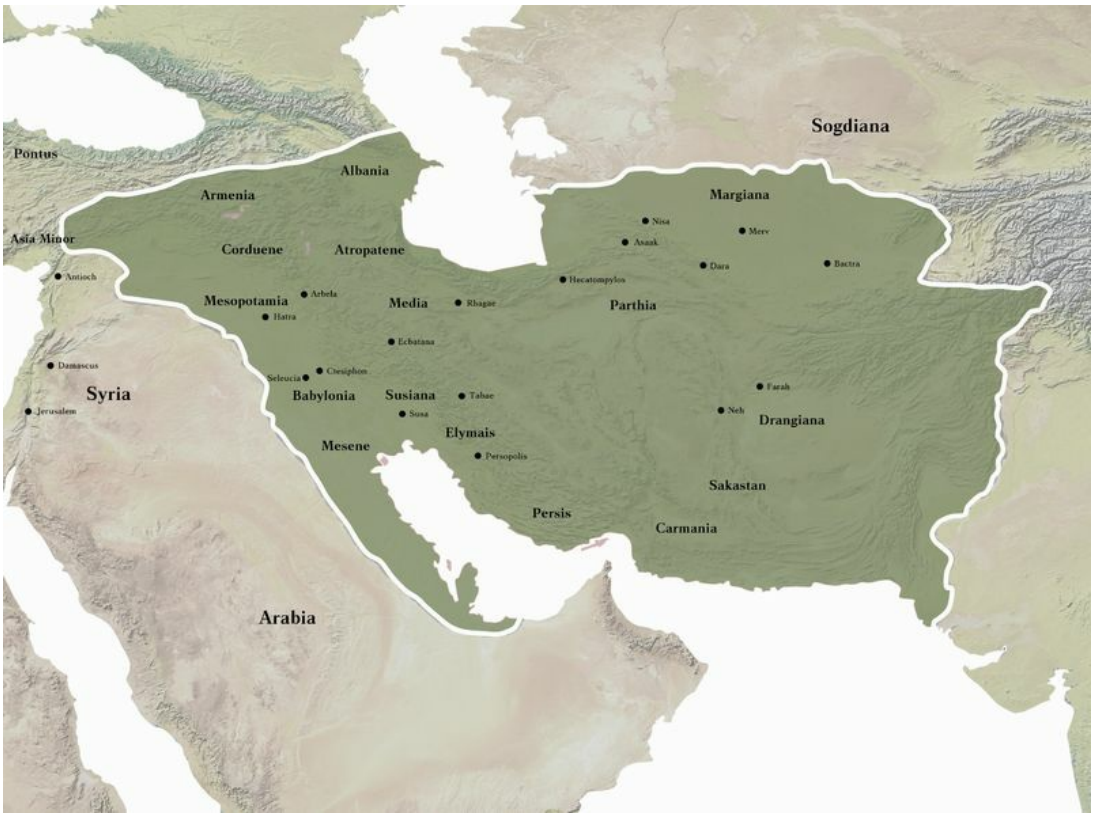
From Justin's excerpt, it seems that as the Greco-Bactrian kingdom was forming in c. 246 BCE, during the Third Syrian War, much of the outer Seleucid Empire was similarly breaking away. Another example is Cappadocia in the west of the Seleucid Empire, which separated under the Greek ruler Ariarathes III, who had inherited his position as a governor of the Cappadocian satrapy but went on to proclaim himself king of an independent region in c. 250 BCE.

When Alexander the Great had taken over the Achaemenid Empire, he'd combined Parthia and Hyrcania (southeast of the Caspian Sea) into a single satrapy. The satrapy remained combined under the Seleucids. During the reigns of Seleucus' son, Antiochus I (r. c. 281-261 BCE), and grandson, Antiochus II (r. c. 261-246 BCE), Parthia remained part of the Seleucid Empire. However, when Antiochus II's son, Seleucus II, inherited the territory, the Parthians rebelled under their Iranian governor, Andragoras, and fractured to form an independent kingdom. (Seleucus II, r. c. 246-225 BCE, was considered a weakling ruler with poor military prowess who had been put on the throne by his mother.)

Not much is known about Andragoras except that he ruled Parthia independently from 245 BCE until his death in 238 BCE. Once he had caused greater Parthia to secede from Seleucid, Andragoras had difficulty maintaining the boundaries of his land since he lacked military support from the Seleucids. The Parni[68] tribes were still immigrating from Central Asia at this time, and their potential numbers were becoming a military (and political) threat to Parthia.

According to the Greek geographer Strabo, the Parni were of the Dahae super-tribe of Central Asia. Skilled on horseback, they were very mobile and difficult to control. They often retreated to the region of the Aral Sea,[69] which was a large water body between modern-day Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. ("Aral" translates as "island archipelago" since the sea was replete with islands.) Sometime in the mid-3rd century BCE, a Parni leader called Arsaces rose to power. The exact origins of Arsaces are debated, with the possibility of this founder of the Parthian Empire being everything from

an obscure herdsman from the north to Parthian nobility of the Seleucid Empire. Since the Macedonians had a record of using Dahae cavalry archers in their mercenary armies, both versions may be correct.



[13] The Parthian Empire in the 1st century BCE, showing the approximate locations of Asaak, Nisa, Hecatompylos, Ctesiphon, and the Dahae Lands.

In 250 BCE, Arsaces and his soldiers had penetrated the southern reaches of their land that bordered Parthia (Parthava) and established a capital at Asaak. Asaak, of which the exact location is unknown, would become one of the capitals of the Parthian Empire. The city could have been adjacent to modern-day Quchan—just inside the border of northern Iran and 800 kilometers (500 miles) east of Tehran. By 247 BCE, Arsaces had been crowned—and possibly self-proclaimed—king of Asaak.

Sometime after Arsaces was crowned king, he invaded the northern reaches of Parthia with his brother Tiridates I. The secession of Parthia and Bactria from the Seleucid Empire may have instigated this invasion as the socio-political landscape around the Parni began to shift. Over a three-year campaign, the Arsacid (of Arsaces) army had invaded all of Parthia and killed the king, Andragoras, by 238 BCE. From 238-217 BCE, Arsaces was king of Parthia and subsequently Hyrcania. The Parthians would dominate ancient

Iran for almost five hundred years until 224 CE. The Parthian, or Arsacid Empire, had been born.

Arsaces' first real obstacle was in c. 231-227 BCE when Seleucus II attempted to take back Parthia from the west. To Parthia's east, the Greco-Bactrian kingdom under Diodotus II threatened Parthia's borders. To avoid a double confrontation, Arsaces concluded a peace treaty with Diodotus II, thus securing his eastern and northeastern borders. However, Seleucus II managed to invade Parthia for a time, chasing its king north towards his ancestral lands near the Aral Sea. But Seleucus II was soon drawn away by his troubled territories along the western borders of the Seleucid Empire and evacuated Parthia, allowing Arsaces to return and continue ruling.

The writer Justin stated that the founding king of the Parthian Empire "settled the Parthian government, levied soldiers, built fortresses, and strengthened his towns." He also founded more cities and towns, including Nisa. Nisa, in modern-day Turkmenistan, continued to serve as the royal residence of the Arsacid dynasty into the 1st century BCE. Nisa was just north of Asaak across the Atrak River.

The period of 238-129 BCE was considered the era of the Seleucid-Parthian Wars. Between the reign of Arsaces I and his son and successor, Arsaces II (r. c. 217/211-191 BCE), there may have been a period of Seleucid rule for up to six years, or simply a lapse in Parthian hold over its acquired territories. But an incursion by Seleucid King Antiochus III (sixth ruler of the Seleucid Empire from 222-187 BCE and a direct descendant of Seleucus I Nicator) in c. 209 BCE was successful, and both Parthia and the Greco-Bactrian kingdoms agreed to recognize the Seleucid Empire as a nominal overlord for a time.

The third and fourth kings of Parthia, Phriapatius (r. c. 191-176 BCE), and Phraates (r. c. 176-171 BCE), enabled Parthia to consolidate itself as an independent kingdom to the south of the Caspian Sea, sandwiched between the Seleucid and Greco-Bactrian Empires. But the small, sovereign state started by Arsaces grew to its greatest extent under King Mithradates I ("the Great"), who ruled from 171-139/8 BCE). Mithradates antagonized his western and eastern neighbors by simultaneously starting a campaign against the Greco-Bactrians and invading and conquering the former lands of Media and Mesopotamia.

Mithradates I built up the Parthian Empire as the Achaemenids had before

him, eventually contesting the growing might of Rome on the western borders of Parthia (Asia Minor and the eastern Mediterranean). At its greatest, the Parthian Empire grew to include the Middle East, Western Asia, Mesopotamia, Iran, Central Asia, and parts of Pakistan. But as with the previous Persian Empires, the warlike nomads of the Asiatic steppes still posed a problem, and the Parthians were constantly defending the borders to their north and east. The warlike Huns of Central Asia, in particular, were displacing nomadic tribes and pushing them south into Parthia. The Saka, Scythians, and Massagetae had always threatened Persia and continued to push at Parthia's borders at the head of a widespread Asiatic migration of nomadic tribes. Both successors to Mithradates I—Phraates II (r. c. 139/8-128 CE) and Artabanus I (r. c. 128-124 BCE)—were killed during Parthia's struggles with various invading nomads. (Between the 1st century BCE and the 1st century of the Common Era, nomadic tribes eventually ousted the Macedonian rulers of the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom. Strabo describes how the Greater Yuezhi tribe consisting of Asii, Pasiani, Tochari, and Sacarauli gained Bactria. These Yuezhi originated from an area of grasslands in Western China and eventually formed the Kushan Empire where Bactria had been at the start of the Common Era.)

From Mithradates I's rulership onward, seven Parthian kings are recorded as rulers until the start of the Common Era. A further nineteen kings have been identified through numismatic[70] evidence from the start of the Common Era until the Sasanian period that began in c. 225 CE. However, these king lists should not be considered complete or comprehensive because, like all the Iranian Empires before the Parthians, many petty kings ruled within the empire simultaneously. The evidence of minor kingdoms ruled by an overarching Parthian sovereign is most prominent from 77 to 147 CE. The coins of eight kings representing these seventy years have been discovered. However, the overarching Parthian Empire was ruled by just one dynasty of kings, the Arsacids. Although their last king was killed by the first ruler of the Sasanian Empire, the dynasty continued its lineage in Armenia, as well as surrounding regions such as modern-day Georgia, Iberia, and the Caucasus.

The Seleucid Empire continued to threaten the Parthians until c. 130 BCE when Mithradates' son, Phraates II, faced the Seleucid Antiochus VII as he made inroads into recapturing parts of Babylonia and Media from the Iranians. However, the local Iranians supported the Parthian overlords above the Seleucids and revolted in the towns retaken by the Macedonians. At the

Battle of Ecbatana in 129 BCE, Antiochus VII was killed as the Parthians swept through Media. Thus, the Parthians reclaimed their lands from the Hellenes for the final time. They continued a close relationship with the Macedonian people within their empire, with whom they had no quarrel.

Other kingdoms arose in the power vacuums left by shifting empires, and by 141 BCE, a southern Mesopotamian kingdom, Characene, had been founded at the head of the Persian Gulf. Characene was established around riverine and maritime trade and was a pivotal node linking the waterways of the Euphrates and Tigris with the Lower Sea and the world at large. The kingdom also facilitated trade movement to and from Susa via the Karun River. Although Characene was started by the Iranian, Hyspaosines,[71] it became largely Arabic. The kingdom existed for about three-and-a-half centuries, collapsing at about the same time as the Parthian Empire. For much of its existence, however, Characene recognized the ultimate sovereignty of Parthia, no matter how independently it governed itself.

Similarly, Elymais (Elamais)[72] grew and collapsed at the same time as Characene. Adjacent to Characene on its eastern side, Elymais was a modern version of "Elam." While its boundaries didn't reach as far as Susa or into the Zagros, it reflected the ancient culture of the Elamites. Like Characene, Elymais was an independent state that often functioned as a vassal of Parthia.

From c. 124-91/87 BCE, Mithradates II (also referred to as "the Great") brought Parthian Persia to a powerful new zenith, like his namesake before him. His territories reached western and eastern extremes, meaning that Parthia needed to become engaged in diplomatic relations with Rome and China. He conquered the surrounding nomads to whom both of his predecessors had lost their lives. He formed a peace treaty with Characene, bringing them into his empire as a strategic vassal state, and prevented the Arabic raids north into Babylonia. He also brought Elymais under control. Mithradates II identified himself and his Arsacid dynasty strongly with the Achaemenids and was the first Iranian king to use the ancient title "king of kings" since before the Hellenistic period.

From the time of Mithradates II, the internal royal families of Parthia began to experience a "time of internal disorder," common to all imperial royal courts throughout history, in which a ruling elite takes up insular command. After Mithradates II's death, a series of infighting and royal assassinations persisted, and parts of Parthia, such as Anatolia, began to break away from the empire. By the 6th decade BCE, Rome was the new Mediterranean

superpower in Europe, North Africa, and Western Asia. Like the Macedonians and Assyrians before them, the Romans would become the principal competition for Persian autonomy and expansion.

In 54/53 BCE, the Romans experienced a crushing loss against Parthia under their commander Crassus[73] at the Battle of Carrhae (modern-day Harran, Turkey). Crassus was one of three leaders in an alliance that included Pompey and Caesar. (Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, 106-48 BCE, and Gaius Julius Caesar, 100-44 BCE, became embroiled in a civil war from 49-45 BCE before the victor, Caesar, established the Roman Empire and took the helm as absolute dictator.) The Romans had been aiming for Mesopotamia, and it was only in 41/40 BCE that the Parthians retaliated and overcame large parts of Asia Minor, Palestine, and Syria. But the Roman counterattack in 39 BCE left the Parthians in a worse state than before, and internal royal court strife caused by Phraates IV (r. c. 40/37-3/2 BCE) all but destroyed the Parthian Empire from within. In 36 BCE, the Roman General Antony[74] marched an enormous army towards Parthia only to retreat and be hounded home with staggering losses. Despite its internal decay, ancient Persia still held firm. From approximately 32-25 BCE, the Parthian Empire struggled with civil war, which the Romans may have fueled to undermine the empire.

By 20 BCE, the Romans under Caesar Augustus (63 BCE-14 CE) forged a peace treaty with Parthia. (The Parthians needed to accept their vulnerable internal condition and concede.) The Euphrates River was used as a demarcation boundary between the Roman and Parthian Empires. Although tensions between the two empires continued into the Common Era throughout the Roman-Parthian Wars (54 BCE-217 CE),[75] the encounters generally ended with renewed negotiations over boundaries (and specifically over Armenia), with both sides recognizing the power and sovereignty of the other. The Persians went as far as to send some of their princes to spend time in the courts of Rome before returning to lead the Arsacid dynasty.

By the rule of Artabanus II (r. c. 10/11-38 CE), a form of peace came over the Parthian Empire, including within the Roman-Parthian political alliances. Artabanus took the opportunity to replace the heads of his satrapies with Parthians to consolidate the empire's power. This replacement of the heads of provinces was successful except in the region from where the Persian kings had originated—Persis. A ruling elite known as the *Fratarakas* would pronounce themselves as localized kings and achieve a certain level of independence from the Hellenic world and the Parthians. These provincial

rulers acted as independent royalty, first as vassals of the Macedonian kings and then under Parthia. However, when the Sasanians took power in 224 CE, they appeared to eliminate all contesting royal houses, such as those of lower Mesopotamia, Elam, and Persis, and the Frataraka dynasty disappeared.

Until the rise of the Sasanian Empire, the Parthians and the Romans continued an uneasy truce and an erratic relationship that swung between threats and diplomacy. However, during the reign of Parthian King Osroes (r. c. 108/9-127/8 CE) in 114 CE, the Trajan-Parthian War began under the Roman Emperor Trajan (r. 98-117 CE). Trajan captured some of Parthian Mesopotamia but died in 117 CE. His successor, Hadrian (r. 117-138 CE), acknowledged that infiltrating Parthia had been a mistake. The Romans withdrew, and the quasi-peace returned. The Parthians and Romans did not always react to the other's attempts to grab territory or sovereignty because of the flourishing trade route that had been established across their lands. Roman incursions into Parthia always resulted in retreats with heavy losses (including large payments to the Parthians as reparation), and the Parthians were wise enough to know that their empire couldn't extend west against the might of Rome. Therefore, the two powers squabbled over the fringe territories of Syria, Armenia, and Northern Mesopotamia, with the Romans sometimes coming to briefly occupy the Parthian Mesopotamian capitals.

One important Parthian capital was the Mesopotamian city of Ctesiphon, just northeast of Seleucia on the east bank of the Tigris River. The Seleucia/Ctesiphon urban node became the main imperial, administrative, and trading nexus in Babylonia during the Parthian era. Ctesiphon was the winter capital of the Arsacid kings and had replaced Hecatompylos in northern Iran from the time that the Parthians had gained lower Mesopotamia—during the reign of Mithradates I. Hecatompylos (technically in Hyrcania) had been established during the Achaemenid Empire or possibly before. By 200 BCE, it was one of the capitals of the Arsacid kings; its name translates to "one hundred gates" because it had more than four gates into the city.

Nisa was yet another royal seat of the Parthians. Mithradates I renamed the city Mithrādatkert, and it became renowned for its exquisite and powerful horses. However, by the 1st decade BCE, the city was destroyed by an earthquake and ceased to be occupied. Nisa has supplied abundant archaeological wealth, including significant buildings, mausoleums, a treasury (plundered), shrines and artworks, and inscriptions. Included in the works were multitudes of ostraca—broken sherds of pottery with brief

inscriptions on them. (The inscriptions were written after the pottery was broken, and the broken shards were used as “scrap paper.”) The ostraca have provided historians with information about daily life in Parthia.

Although the Parthians were Iranian descendants, their rulership style was more like that of the Seleucids than the Achaemenids, with many aspects of the royal courts adopting a Greco-Iranian style. The Parthians ruled from a distance as a group of tribal warlords that moved between ruling city-states. They practiced a decentralized, chaotic form of overlordship, which ironically worked well in keeping the large majority of Iranians peaceful. This era of peace had two main root causes. Firstly, when the Parthian ruling class fought, it was among their internal ruling families and clans. The common Iranian population continued with their everyday lives, relatively unaffected. Secondly, the semi-nomadic warlike nature of the Parthians meant they were always ready to defend their empire. The Parthians neither paid taxes to foreign empires nor extracted excessive taxes from their own people but rather relied on a hierarchical system of kingship similar to the feudal system of the Middle Ages. The Parthian ruling elite did, however, require a steady supply of reliable horses and weapons, which they used to successfully defend the borders of Persia. The Parthian Empire was the longest of the ancient Iranian Empires, possibly because of this unintrusive leadership style.

The Parthian army was smaller and less centralized than the Achaemenid army had been, and there was no formal standing army. The king-of-kings would raise a makeshift army from his petty kingdoms, relying on the feudal system to provide fighting men, horses, and resources. The Parthians had a unique and highly effective approach to fighting, using enormous cavalry to overwhelm the opposition. Most of the cavalrymen were lightly armed with bows and arrows. Parthian boys learned from a young age how to ride horses and shoot arrows with bows. A portion of the Parthian cavalrymen were *cataphracts* (or *lancers*), heavily armored fighters in chainmail and metal helmets with their horses covered in metal scale armor. These cataphracts carried bows with arrows or lances and presented an intimidating and virtually impenetrable front to the enemy. (The spears, or lances, were so powerful that they could pierce two men at once.) The cavalry was also essential against the Macedonian and Roman phalanxes. Although the Parthian army did have foot soldiers, it relied most on its extensive cavalry to get troops from one side of the empire to the other quickly since the empire

was continually threatened on multiple fronts.

The Parthian army sometimes had a unit of camel cavalry, but the Romans combated the effectiveness of camels by scattering caltrops on the battlefield —the metal *area denial weapon* lethal to the feet of camels and elephants. The Parthians used swift hit-and-run tactics and avoided long wars or siege tactics since they didn't maintain the equipment to sustain drawn-out, heavily equipped battles. (They didn't use war chariots and only used wagons when absolutely necessary; camels served as the main mode of transport.) The Parthian cavalrymen were masters at leading their enemies away from their fixed formation and then turning and descending upon them, firing a hail of arrows. The "Parthian Shot" has also gone down in history as an arrow meeting its target while the rider moves at full gallop toward the enemy. They carried war banners decorated with dragons or displaying the Iranian royal standard—the Derafsh Kaviani. (Derafsh Kaviani was a red square containing a purple square with a yellow sun in the center. Four yellow oblongs stretched from the sun to the corners of the flag, with yellow circles in between the oblongs. The Derafsh Kaviani, as well as versions or vexilloids[76] of this standard, continued into the Sasanian Empire.)

The Parthians were the first Iranian Empire required to continually fight on multiple fronts—defending their western, northern, and eastern borders. The flexibility of their royal court and armies meant they could respond quickly when necessary, but their nomadic style of rulership meant they didn't leave much in the way of literary evidence of their empire. Most written sources referring to the Parthians are external: Greek, Roman, and Chinese. (Specifically, the Han[77] Dynasty Chinese emperors, keen to form alliances to their west, left records of their interactions with Parthia.) The Parthian language was one of the Indo-European dialects that evolved into part of the Northwestern Iranian language groupings. Its widespread use during the Parthian era extended to Armenia and the surrounding territories, whose modern languages borrowed extensively from the extinct Parthian. In addition to retaining a heavy Armenian presence, the Parthians maintained a good relationship with the Macedonian Hellenes within their dominions, even after the collapse of the Seleucid Empire. Greeks were known to support Iranian rulership and often fought in their armies, if only as mercenaries.

Though ultimately successful in their approach to warfare, the Parthians were sometimes referred to as "barbarians" or "princes on horseback" because of their unorthodox approach to battles. They were neither as politically-minded

nor as power-hungry as the other Iranian empires. The Parthians were most interested in gaining new grazing grounds for their livestock (particularly their horses), acquiring feudal lands, and dominating the lands through which the trade routes ran. The Parthians were culturally less advanced than their forebears but continued the tradition of minting their coinage with the Achaemenid seated archer—a symbol of royalty. In effect, the Arsacids were more concerned about maintaining an ancient Iranian national identity than anything else.

This relatively lackadaisical approach to rulership eventually undermined the Parthians, as they didn't pay enough attention to emerging power structures at the heart of their own empire. While the Parthian kings had been occupied with Rome, the head of the Istakhr satrapy of Persis (Pars), Ardashir, had gained surrounding territories and made himself more powerful than he ought to have been. Ardashir may have begun his conquests in c. 220 CE, and by the time he had drawn the attention of the Parthian king, Artabanus IV, it was too late. When confronted, Ardashir drew the last Parthian king into a battle and, along with his son and heir, Shapur I, prepared carefully for the engagement. The final encounter between Ardashir and Artabanus was in 224 at the Battle of Hormozdgan.[78] When the Parthian king was killed, Ardashir began the Sasanian Empire.

PART THREE: An Era of Change (225 CE-650 CE)

Chapter 10-Sasanian Empire: The Last Imperial Dynasty

The first king of the Sasanians, Ardashir I, was crowned in c. 226 CE and created a dynasty from the name of one of his ancestors, Sasan (most likely his grandfather). The Sasanians would rule ancient Iran for more than four hundred years during the "Neo-Persian" era until their conquest by the Arabs from 633 to 654 CE. Although the Parthians had technically been Iranians, they'd been viewed as foreigners by the stalwarts of Persis who resided at the epicenter of the ancient Achaemenid geopolitical region and could trace their ancestors back to the Elamites. From within, the Sassanids referred to themselves as the Kingdom of the Iranians, or Erānshahr (Iranshæhr), "Dominion of the Iranians (Aryans)."

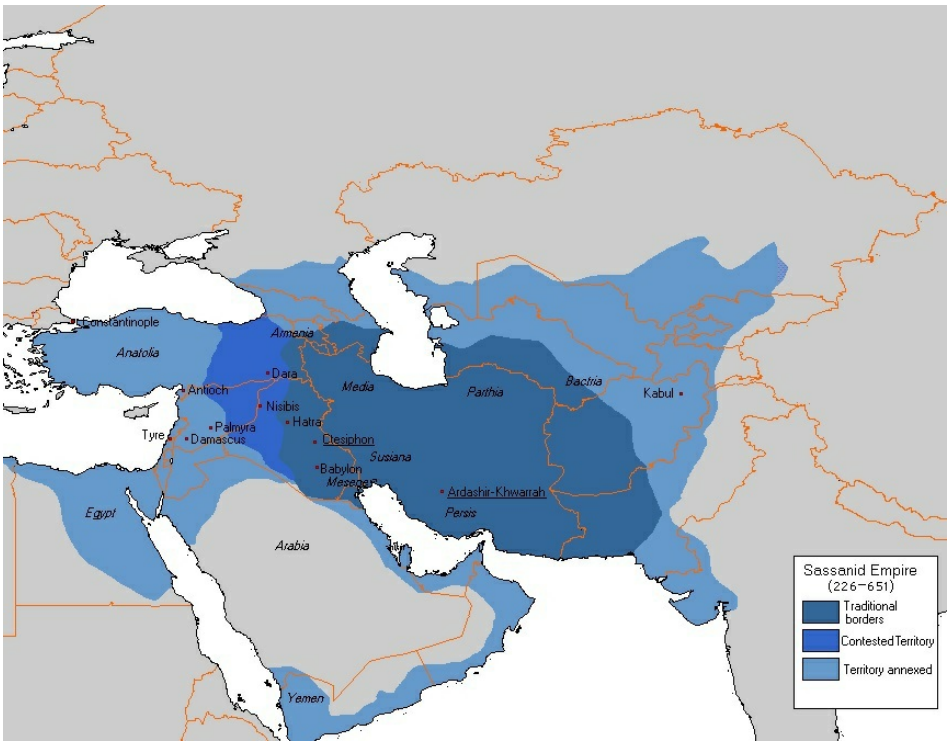
When the Sasanian Empire (Sassanid Empire, House of Sasan, or Sasanian Dynasty) arose, all but one of their kings over four centuries were descendants of the House of Sasan. No other Iranian royal house rose up to snatch the Sasanian throne, despite significant inner turmoil within the ruling family. This respect for the Sassanid Dynasty is believed to have resulted from the Persian people showing allegiance to a lineage connected to the Achaemenids—the first true Persian Empire. (A familial link between the Achaemenids and the Sassanids is unlikely, but like all Persian imperial dynasties, the Sasanians set about restoring the legacy of their Achaemenid progenitors.) The Sasanian period unfolded during an era in history known as Late Antiquity and is considered by many historians to be the high point of all the Persian Empires.

The Roman-Persian Wars that had started with Crassus in 53 BCE continued until 628 CE, just before Islamic invasion. (From 395 CE, these were the Byzantine-Persian Wars, or more specifically, the Byzantine-Sasanian Wars, until the fall of Persia.) The Byzantine Empire,[79] or Byzantium, included the eastern provinces of the former Roman Empire that survived long after the fall of Rome in the 400s Common Era. Byzantium's capital was the cosmopolitan and all-powerful city of its era, Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul, Turkey).

One of the major differences across the territories of Persia in the Common Era was the influence of global and regional religions that emerged as some of the new indomitable power structures. The Roman Emperor Constantine I

(272-337 CE), after whom Constantinople was renamed, was considered the "first Christian Roman Emperor." He ceased Roman persecution of Christians and began widespread support for the religion. Byzantium was characterized by the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church, which grew upon Constantine's foundations and his legalization of Christianity in 313 CE. By 380, Christianity was the state religion of Rome, which birthed the Roman Catholic Church[80]—although many versions of Christianity had existed across Byzantium and within pockets of ancient Iran since the early Common Era. Constantine's actions legitimized the existing Christian religion and gave significant impetus to the spread of Christianity and its number of followers.

Zoroastrianism continued as the main state religion on the Iranian Plateau and among the members of the Sasanian ruling class. However, Mani (c. 216-274 CE), a Parthian prophet, introduced a rival belief system known as Manichaeism. Manichaeism, and Mani himself, were protected and encouraged during the reign of Shapur I, who also supported the Jews and religious tolerance in general. Manichaeism rode on the coattails of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Christianity. It spread quickly through the Aramaic-speaking world from the 3rd to 7th centuries and was a powerful and prominent religion of its time, reaching from Rome to China and briefly rivaling Christianity as the main religion to replace the polytheistic and pagan beliefs of Europe and Asia.



[14] Shifting boundaries of the Sassanid Empire from 226 to 651 CE showing the traditional boundaries around the capital of Ardashir-Khwarrah (Gur) in Persis with the contested territory of Asia Minor, Armenia, and the Caucuses, and finally the outer limits of the annexed territories.

The Sassanid Dynasty aimed to recreate the Achaemenids' might and splendor and to remove the Hellenic influences from their lands. The Parthians before them had adopted Mediterranean influences, particularly within their royal courts and art. Evidence does not suggest that the ancient Iranians integrated Hellenic culture into the heart of their societies. Rather, they added it as another layer to the more superficial appearances of their empire.

The House of Sasan tightened its controls over society and emulated the Achaemenid style of urbanization and infrastructural and economic development. The Sassanids built a multitude of towns and encouraged rampant population growth. They built canals, viaducts, cisterns, and irrigation systems to support settlements and agriculture and instituted a widespread legal system. Ardashir-Khwarrah was the first capital founded in the Sassanid era, but technically it was an administrative region in which Ardashir I founded the capital of Gur, or Gor. Ardashir-Khwarrah, or Gur, was in Fars, 180 kilometers (112 miles) south of Persepolis (modern-day Firuzabad), and may have been built before the Sassanids took power. Gur was one of several capitals used by the Sasanians, including the older Parthian capitals of Mesopotamia and Iran. (Istakhr, five kilometers (three miles) north of Persepolis, had served as the Sassanid capital for a few years at the start of the Sasanian Empire and was the original capital of the Frataraka of Pars.) Ctesiphon also remained an important Persian capital. In contrast to the Parthians before them, the Sasanians returned to a centralized and hierarchical type of governance and administrative system rather than the shifting government style of their predecessors.

The Sasanian kings were once again known as the shāhanshāh (king of kings) who ruled over petty kingdoms of varying ethnicities with minor kings, or *shahrdars*. Society was once again divided into strict classes: royalty, nobility (landowners and petty kings), priests, warriors, administrators, artisans, and commoners. The knightly caste, or *Aswaran/Azatan*, could be called to duty at a moment's notice and remained a loyal and mobile force for the Persians. During the Sassanid era, the Zoroastrian priests achieved a significant level of power and reinforced strict social stratification through their privileged positions. Besides the Persian king, the most powerful men of

state were the head priest (*mobadan mobad*), the military commander (*eran spahbod*), and the head of the administrative bureaucracy.

Thirty-one Sasanian kings (and queens) are listed as having ruled between 224 and 650. The son of the founder of the Sasanian Empire, Shapur I (r. c 240-270 CE), was successful in his attacks on Rome, and his troops often penetrated deeply into Roman territory—as far as Antioch. At the Battle of Edessa[81] in 260, Rome experienced complete devastation. Afterward, Roman Emperor Valerian[82] and his entire army were taken captive by the Persians. This was an unprecedented move that sent shockwaves through the Roman Empire. The alleged fates of Valerian and his men differ widely and include outlandish suppositions of humiliation, torture, and other gruesome ends. However, many sources claim that Valerian lived out his days contentedly in a Persian royal court. His men were supposedly put to work on the various infrastructure projects around Persia.

Shapur I's mischief continued as he invaded Caesarea (in modern-day Israel on the Mediterranean coast) and captured 400,000 inhabitants to take back to populate Persian cities. But, by 263, Shapur's incursions had been quelled by the Romans. Six rulers later, Shapur II (r. 309-379 CE) regained Sasanian territories lost since Shapur I's reign. After Shapur I, Hormoz I[83] reigned for a year, followed by a three-year reign by Bahram I until 276 CE, when Bahram II ascended the throne.

[15] Rock relief at Naqsh-e Rustam (Rostam) showing Shapur I subjugating the Roman Emperors Valerian and Phillip before him. The relief is close to the tomb of Darius the Great, but

the trilingual inscription accompanying the relief in Greek, Middle Persian, and Parthian is undecipherable. The priestly figure, Kartir, standing behind the horse was added later in the reign of Bahram II.

During the reign of Bahram II (r. 276-293 CE), the Zoroastrian high priest Kartir gained extraordinary power and enforced his position by persecuting Christians, Buddhists, Jews, and the followers of the prophet Mani (Manichaeans). Mani died in prison in the year 274 under the reign of Bahram I (273-276 CE). It was widely believed that Kartir instigated the death of Mani, which eventually gave the prophet Mani even more influence as the primary martyr of Manichaeism.

Kartir (Karder, Karter, or Kerdir) held extraordinary influence over several Sasanian kings from the reign of Hormoz I (r. 272-273) through the reigns of the successive kings Bahram I and II. During the reign of Bahram III (r. 293), Kartir was at the head of a rebellion that overthrew the king and placed Narseh (r. 293-302) on the throne. After that, Kartir faded into obscurity. But during his time, the priest featured prominently in bas-reliefs and inscriptions throughout Iran. Many of these appearances in the "history books" of ancient Iran seem to be either post-dated (included after the reign of the relevant king) or self-proclamations of his own greatness and rise to power. However, it appears that religious tolerance was once again instituted under Narseh.

The first golden age of the Sassanid epoch was from 309-379 CE, but it was also the time when Arabs from the south began attacking Iran, including Pars. This era was marked by the rulership of one king, Shapur II. His predecessor, Hormoz II, had been killed by Bedouins while hunting, and the royal nobility had dispatched with his three sons by killing the first, blinding the second, and imprisoning the third. The third son later escaped to the Byzantine territories. His half-brother (Shapur II) by another of his father's wives was crowned in utero by placing a crown on the mother's belly. Shapur II was born into kingship, but the empire was ruled by his mother and the noble court until he came of age.

Like Shapur I before him, Shapur II proved to be a strong king who reigned for his entire life—seventy years. He successfully led incursions into the Arabian territories against the Lakhmids to the south. The Arabic Lakhmids, or Banu Lakhm, were a kingdom of southern Iraq and eastern Arabia from c. 300-600 CE. They were the on-off allies and vassals of the Sassanids. The Persian king continued a twenty-year war with the Byzantine Empire, including nine pitched battles and a series of sieges during which his son,

Prince Narseh, was killed. But before anything could be concluded with Rome, the king's attention was drawn northeast and east to the restless nomads along Iran's borders. The territories critical to the Silk Trade Route were being threatened, specifically Sogdia (which became the Iranian region of Turan, or southern Central Asia).

Shapur II successfully defeated the northeastern tribes and proceeded to recruit King Grumbates of the Kidarites (of the super tribe Chionitae) to assist him in overcoming Rome. Five Byzantine provinces were gained by the Iranians, including the much-coveted Armenia. This golden age king of Persia pushed his orthodox Zoroastrian agenda hard and ensured the completion of the religion's literary works, the Avesta. He supported Jews but persecuted Christians, possibly in response to Emperor Constantine's widespread acceptance of the growing religion.

An intermediate Sasanian era stretched from 379 to 498 CE. Eleven kings ruled during this time, beginning with Ardashir II (r. 379-383 CE) and ending with Zamasp (r. 496-498 CE). Persia was relatively stable during this time with limited trouble against the Byzantines. History doesn't suggest that there was a particularly strong king during the intermediate phase. No major upheavals took place, and each successive king continued the systems of the king before.

The intermediate period became interesting with the rule of Yazdegerd I (399-421 CE), who was a religiously tolerant leader that married a Jewish princess. During Yazdegerd's rulership, a solid peace—including reciprocal diplomacy—was established with Byzantium. His son and successor, Bahram V (r. 421-438 CE), became the subject of significant myth and legend in ancient Iran. Also known as Bahram-e Gur, this king's heroic reputation extended beyond the Islamization of Iran. Bahram's mother was Soshandukht, the daughter of the leader of the Iranian Jewish community, or Exilarch.

Bahram-e Gur achieved two significant conquests during his reign. Firstly, he took back Armenia as a complete province of Persia—a terrain that had been the continual sticking point between the Sassanids and Byzantines for centuries. Secondly, this vigorous king overtook Central Asia, where his image remained upon the coins of the region (equivalent to modern-day Uzbekistan) for centuries. Bahram V had needed to overcome an invasion in 427 CE by the Hephthalites to achieve the conquest of these lands in Central Asia. The nomadic Hephthalites, also known as the "White Huns" after the

Asian Huns, were prevalent from the 5th to 8th centuries of the Common Era.

These nomads eventually settled north and northeast of Persia and came to occupy Central Asia and parts of Bactria. They established provinces and created a royal family—the Imperial Hephthalites. (But they remained a tribal community with elements.) The Hephthalites' origins are unclear, but as they came to occupy the fringes of the ancient Iranian lands, they were known as part of the Xyon (Xionites) or Huna. The Xionites were a collective name for the tribes that occupied Bactria and Transoxiana—the Byzantine-named region of southern Central Asia. Other tribes associated with the Xionites were the Kushans and Kidarites.

Bahram's adventures also included time spent in Africa, and he was known to be an avid huntsman. The Sasanian presence in Africa is recorded from at least the time of the prophet Mani, who specifically mentioned Egypt in some of his works. The precise reign of the Sasanian Empire over northern and northeastern Africa is unknown, but there was a considerable interchange of goods and culture between Africa, Byzantium, Persia, and beyond. (Kushan coins dating to the second century have been uncovered in Zimbabwe.)

The Sassanids continued their friction with the Byzantines and the White Huns throughout the intermediate period. Still, they maintained international relations with these western and eastern neighbors. From 488 to 531, the Persian ruler Kavad I[84] attempted to reform the excesses of the upper echelons of his society by following the dictates of a "communistic" Zoroastrian priest (*mobad*), Mazdak. (Mazdak considered himself a prophet of Ahura Mazda and believed that his methods were necessary social reforms.) However, the tenets instituted by King Kavad and his priest were extremely unpopular with the clergy and the nobility.

The king was overthrown from within the royal court in 496 CE and banished to the prison in Susa known as the "Castle of Oblivion," from where he escaped and sought protection with the Hephthalites. The Hephthalites helped the exiled king win back his throne three years later,[85] which he maintained for a further thirty-three years. During this second term of tenure, Kavad persecuted the followers of his former priest Mazdak—the followers of "Mazdakism"—and went as far as to have Mazdak executed.

During the reign of Khosrow[86] I (531-579 CE), Sasanian Persia achieved another golden age—although 498 to 622 CE was an extended period of strength and abundance for ancient Iran. Khosrow I, also known as

“Anushirvan the Just/with the immortal soul,” was instrumental in stabilizing ancient Iran during his almost five-decade-long rule. He was an ambitious but stable ruler. Khosrow reformed the tax system, tightened bureaucratic controls, and centralized the army. He instituted village lords, or *dihqans*, as intermediaries between land-based tax collectors and the nobility. Khosrow introduced systems that became the foundation for the provincial administration of the Sassanid Empire for the next seventy years.

After centuries of war, Khosrow Anushirvan made considerable progress in rebuilding Persia. He formalized the army by creating a new body of paid knights, or *dehkans*. He invested in infrastructure projects, rebuilt towns, restocked farms, and refurbished the ancient irrigation systems of his forebears. Besides reorganizing the army, he built fortresses at the strategic mountain passes at the borders of his lands and resettled loyal tribes to police the main thoroughfares in and out of the Sasanian territory.

For the previous millennium, Rome had been paying bribes or ransoms to Persia to either keep the peace, spare a life, or make reparations for war. The Byzantine Emperor Justinian[87] paid abundant[88] pieces of gold to Khosrow to ensure stability in an “eternal peace” at the start of Khosrow’s reign. But, dissatisfied with the Byzantines’ conduct, in 540, the Sasanians invaded Byzantium as far as Antioch. After causing chaos in Western Asia on the way home, they demanded further tribute from Justinian. Byzantine-Persian hostilities continued across their frontiers, often interrupted by a plague that swept through the empires in successive waves. (This bubonic plague or “Justinian Plague” was one of several plagues that interrupted the Roman-Persian Wars over more than half a millennium of hostilities.)

By 562, a “Fifty-Year Peace” was agreed between the rulers, with an annual tribute paid to Persia to maintain this peace. However, by this time, Justinian was eighty years old, and he died three years later. The emperor’s successor, Justin II (r. 565-578 CE), ended all tributes to foreign empires, and so the peace treaty with the Sasanian Empire was abandoned in 572. A revolt in Armenia and the execution of the Persian governor and his guard in that land added to the hostilities. For generations, the Sasanians had drawn tribute from Byzantium for guarding the passes through the Caucus Mountains, which Justin II put to an end. However, after several battles and sieges, Armenia once again came under the rulership of Persia in Khosrow I’s time, and Justin II sued for peace.

Renewed war with the Byzantines extended beyond the life of Khosrow. He

had been instrumental in social reforms, including human welfare, and was also a philosopher. Both the arts and sciences flourished within his Sassanid era, and he was heralded as the new “Cyrus the Great.” But despite re-establishing the former geographical and socio-political might of Persia, this Sasanian king had been at war on multiple fronts. The Hephthalites still posed a problem to the east, and to the south, unrest in Arabia pulled the Sasanians into new fights. In 570 CE, Ma’d-Karib, half-brother to the King of Yemen, requested Khosrow’s assistance in gaining the throne. From that point onwards, Persia had a base in southern Arabia at the capital of San’a’l (modern-day Sanaa). This base enabled the Sassanids to further control sea trade to the east.

Three reigns after Khosrow I, Khosrow II ruled from 590 to 628 CE. His era was marked by wasteful excesses and wanton luxury. However, he did extend the empire by annexing Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, and Lebanon to the Sasanians. Khosrow II enjoyed military successes within the Byzantine Empire, at times bringing it to the point of collapse by creating alliances against the Sasanian’s old foe, exhausting the Persian armies and the empire’s resources over fifteen years of intensive warfare. However, counterattacks by the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius[89] encouraged trouble deep into Sasanian territories and significantly weakened the Persian Empire. (Heraclius went as far as to sail across the inland Black Sea and attack Persia from its rear.)

The Byzantine Emperor’s campaign resulted in victory at Nineveh in 627 CE, which is considered the climactic battle of the ongoing Byzantine-Sassanid Wars of 602-628 CE. Khosrow II escaped from his seat at the Palace of Dastugerd (Dastagird) near the capital of Ctesiphon, and Heraclius captured the Mesopotamian Sasanian capital. It was about this time that Byzantium learned of Khosrow II’s assassination by his own son, Sheroe (Kavad II). Khosrow II’s legacy was an expansion of territories to rival the Achaemenids; his reign was also an indulgent time that fostered a renaissance in Persian arts and culture.

After Khosrow II’s unwarranted extermination, the Sasanian Empire dissolved into chaos. Kavad II, who had not been the legitimate heir to the dynasty, murdered his brothers as well. History tells of their deaths as the loss of “well-educated, valiant, and chivalrous men” and that the empire was stripped of the potential for a competent ruler. Kavad II’s mad rampage against his own family was instigated during a coup in 628 CE, supported by

his extended family of nobles and some key military generals who gave their armies in support. Kavad II made peace with Byzantium, even promising to return the Holy Cross,[90] a religious Christian artifact that had been stolen from Jerusalem during his father's reign. But Kavad's reign didn't last the year, as he died from a plague.

Over the next four years, the Sassanid Empire disintegrated into disorder. Periods in which military generals ruled were punctuated by legitimate but inappropriate Sasanian rulers who were pushed into power through the desperation of surrounding elites and power moguls. Two of these rulers included the daughters of Kavad II, Queen Azarmidokht and Queen Boran (Porandokht), who ruled in succession from c. 629 to 632. Several others took power until the ascension of the final Persian king, Khosrow II's grandson, Yazdegerd III (Yezdegerd or Yazdgerd, r. 632-651 CE), at the age of eight. He remained a figurehead during the youthful part of his reign as the powers behind the throne continued their destructive behavior.

As the Sasanian Empire collapsed from within, threats at their borders increased. To the west, the Khazars were gaining power. Originally considered part of the Xionites (and specifically a grouping known as the Turkic Khaganate), the Khazars had served as a proxy buffer nation against the Sassanids on behalf of the Byzantines. They would go on to control much of the western extent of the Silk Trade Route. To the east, the Gokturks (Celestial Turks or Blue Turks) were a nomadic clan of the Turkic[91] people of inner Asia. They became one of the main encroaching forces from the 6th to the 8th century of the Common Era and were politically (and possibly genetically) affiliated with the Khazars.

But the biggest threat to Persia would come from the south. By 633, the Arabs were beginning to infiltrate the ancient Iranian lands, bringing their newfound religion, Islam. The Sasanian Empire was in a pitiful state after decades of war, internal political strife, economic decline and massive taxation, corrupt landlords, rigid social stratification, religious instability, and finally, the rapid succession of poor rulership. The time was ripe for a considerable overhaul in kingship across Sasanian lands, and Arabia would be successful in this conquest. A former companion-in-arms of Islam's seminal prophet (Muhammad), Khalid ibn al-Walid, eventually led a conquering army into Persia to collapse the final imperial dynasty of an empire that could trace its origins back four thousand years.

Chapter 11-The Arab Conquest and Islamization: Legacy and Roots in Persian Culture

Islam was founded in the 7th century of the Common Era and was the final of three monotheistic, Abrahamic belief systems centered on the Middle East (along with Judaism and Christianity). Islam was developed by its seminal prophet Muhammad/Muhammed ibn Abdullah (c. 570-632) in Mecca, a city on the eastern shores of the Red Sea in modern-day Saudi Arabia. But the religion was spread by the four caliphates that arose after Muhammad's death. These caliphates were similar to the Diadochi, or "successors," that followed Alexander the Great. The caliphates were politico-religious administrative and military movements that established a chain of command under the head caliph and created expanding boundaries for the transference of the new religion.[92]

Unlike Christianity and Judaism before it, the spread of Islam was extraordinarily rapid, and this monotheistic world religion didn't suffer through centuries of small pockets of persecuted adherents. Islam spread like wildfire after the death of Muhammad—first across the Arabian Peninsula, then north to the Middle East and Asia Minor. From there, Muslims spread their faith thick and fast to North Africa in the west and into Western Asia in the east, finally encompassing ancient Mesopotamia and Iran from 633 to 654 CE. The Muslim conquest of ancient Iran took an astoundingly short two decades, although the Islamization of Persia was considerably slower.

The rapid spread of the Muslim faith in its infancy is attributed, among other things, to disintegrating regional empires' readiness for new leadership and the militant and pervasive way in which Islam was spread. Most importantly, the movement of the caliphates through the existing empires of the time actively spread Islam—it was their primary purpose. Whereas empire-building before Islam had been based on wealth, power, and glory, the caliphates focused on conversion. The caliphates were technically the empires that replaced the Persian, Macedonian, Greek, and Byzantine structures. The Rashidun Caliphate was the first movement of Islam from the prophet's death in 632 until 661 CE. (An internal struggle for sovereignty ended the caliphate and created the split between Sunni and Shia Muslims of modern-day.)

The Rashidun Caliphate was guided by the first four successors of

Muhammad, known as the *Rushidun* according to Sunni Islam (the largest branch of Islam practiced by 90% of the world's Muslims). The Rushidun or "Rightly Guided" caliphs used aggressive military tactics to spread Islam to much of the former Persian territories by the 650s—specifically the Arabian Peninsula, northeastern Africa, the Levant (Middle East), Asia Minor, Western Asia up to the Caucuses, ancient Mesopotamia and Assyria, the Iranian Plateau, parts of Central Asia, and even areas of South Asia.

These first four caliphs were Abu Bakr (r. 632-634), Umar (r. 634-644), Uthman (r. 644-656), and Ali (r. 656-661). Abu Bakr was Muhammad's father-in-law and closest advisor. He ensured the spread of Islam across the Arabian Peninsula and made the first inroads into Byzantium and the Sasanian Empire. Besides overcoming local rebel Arab forces, he also devised the first compilation of Islam's holy book, the Quran. (Muhammad and Abu Bakr are heralded as Islam's most honorable initiators.) Abu Bakr died of illness two years into his leadership of the caliphate and was replaced with Umar.

Umar ibn al-Khattab (or Omar) had been one of Muhammad's right-hand men and was also a father-in-law of the original prophet. During Umar's ten-year reign, he made the conquest of Persia and Byzantium his priority. Umar attacked the Persian Empire on several fronts using precise military tactics and consolidated political and administrative powers to gain control over the Sassanids. Umar also acquired Egypt and the Middle East during his reign but was eventually murdered by a captive Persian slave. His successor, Uthman ibn Affan, made inroads into gaining Armenia and consolidated the Arabian presence across the Iranian Plateau by 650. He also took control over parts of Central Asia, specifically Afghanistan, before being assassinated. The final caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib, was a devout man and reluctant to take power. His reign was marred by internal civil wars over the growing Islamic power structures within newly conquered territories. Like his predecessor, he was assassinated,

Khalid ibn al-Walid was an Arabic general in the service of Muhammad who served under the caliphs Abu Bakr and Umar before dying in 642 of natural causes. He was instrumental in quelling the internal Arabic rebellions that followed Muhammad's death (the Ridda Wars, in which many people proclaimed themselves prophets). Khalid also launched the first campaigns against the Sasanian Empire from 633 to 634 and against Byzantine Syria from 634 to 638 CE. The Sassanids never put up a truly sustained defense

against the Arabian invaders, as their empire was already in turmoil. The young King Yazdegerd III spent his youth fleeing one Persian capital for another as the Muslims sought to take over the empire.

The advent of Islamization took Byzantine and Persian attention away from each other; some records even claim an alliance between Heraclius and Yazdegerd III via the marriage of the Persian king to one of the Byzantine Emperor's daughters or granddaughters. The battles between the Persians and Arabs began in southern Mesopotamia and then moved north toward the capitals of ancient Babylonia. The first defining encounter between Khalid's disciplined armies and ancient Iran was at the Battle of the Bridge (the Battle of al-Jisr) on the bank of the Euphrates River in 634, which was a Sasanian success. The battle was near the city of modern-day Kufa[93] in Iraq, which had become the new Arab capital outside of Saudi Arabia.

The next defining engagement was the Battle of al-Qadisiyyah in 636, which unfolded in southern Mesopotamia and was fought at a time when the caliph Umar needed to split his strength as he fought along two fronts. This was considered the second full invasion of Mesopotamia. To the northwest, the caliphate battled to gain the Levant against Byzantium. After a series of strategic complications and misunderstandings that included Persia, the Byzantines were defeated shortly before Qadisiyyah at the Battle of Yarmouk. This left the Arabs to concentrate on the Persians in Mesopotamia, who had managed to raise an enormous army, including war elephants—a terrifying prospect for the Arabian war horses.

The battle was led by Arabic General Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas (Sa'd ibn Malik, c. 595-674), a contemporary of Muhammad who had also founded the new Arabic-Mesopotamian capital of Kufa. After three months of skirmishes, the Arabs were finally successful at the frontier town of Qadisiyyah (on the west bank of the Ateeq tributary to the Euphrates) during a four-day full-frontal attack. The Islamic success at the Battle of Qadisiyyah was a turning point for the Arabic conquest of Persia, and the Arabs proceeded to swallow up the Sasanian cities of Mesopotamia.

By 637, Ctesiphon was under siege, and once again, the Arabs fought under General Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas. Sa'd had been the seventh free man in history to embrace the Islamic faith and had fought valiantly in Mecca and Medina (the second capital) in Saudi Arabia for Muhammad's faith.[94] Persian King Yazdegerd III was hiding in Ctesiphon, which was presumably the last Sasanian royal outpost with any significant treasury. After a few months,

Ctesiphon gave way to the Muslims, and Yazdegerd III fled east towards ancient Median lands. Yazdegerd's escape ultimately aided the Arabs since he'd left behind a vast Persian treasury. The Muslims had new funds to support their infiltration into Persian lands, and the Sassanids were becoming weaker. Soon, the cities around Ctesiphon also fell to the Arabs.

Once the Iranian nobility realized their defeat, they continued to flee from the invaders and moved deeper into northeastern Iran or into Central Asia (particularly to the northern province of Khorasan[95]). The Zagros Mountains became the natural barrier between the Islamic caliphate states of Mesopotamia and the Levant and the diminishing Sassanid Empire to its east. The Sasanian power vacuum meant that the Persian armies weren't raised—or weren't raised in time—to defend Ctesiphon, rescue the king, or counterattack the fall of Ctesiphon. After several years of stalemate, the Caliphate Umar ordered a full attack on the interior of Persia.

Some regional Sassanid governors attempted to combine their armies and repel the Arab force at the Battle of Nahavand (Nihavand or Nihawand) in 642, but this failed. (The modern city of Nahavand is in Hamedan province in the northern Zagros Mountains, northwestern Iran, and was one of the last remaining strongholds of the Sassanid Empire.) The absence of a central power structure and coordinated military—the very assets that had brought the first Iranian empires to power—left Persia crippled, severely impacting its resource base and particularly its finances. As the money required to run a considerable empire dwindled, so did the empire, and as the defensive fabric of the Sasanian Empire disintegrated, it became an easier and easier target for Muslim conquest.

By 651, the Muslims had conquered the entirety of ancient Iran. The final king of the Persian Empire was assassinated in Merv (near modern-day Mary in Turkmenistan) in 651 under suspicious circumstances. The remaining nobility who settled in Central Asia sought to revive Iranian culture by creating the Samanid dynasty (a late first-millennium empire built upon the remnants of the Sassanids and other regional tribes, which eventually converted to Islam).

The Arabian conquest of Persia had taken a brief eighteen years from start to finish, something neither the Romans nor Byzantines had ever managed to do. The Sassanid Empire was absorbed into the ruling caliphate, along with large parts of the Byzantine Empire. The major urban nodes of former Persia continued to put up a fight but eventually succumbed to the inevitable wave

of Islamization. The Muslims used severe tactics to gain the subservience of Iranians. If cities didn't capitulate, they were devastated and plundered. In more decentralized localities that were difficult to force, the Muslims placed stringent taxes and disadvantages on non-Muslims, thus persuading them to convert through social and financial necessity. The Islamization of ancient Iran was a hostile takeover—a far cry from the tolerant manner in which Cyrus the Great had captured and maintained the loyalty of his lands.

The Arabic invaders destroyed libraries and burned books, decimated cities, and looted where they could. Unlike the Persian Empires before them, they sought to control via destruction and fear rather than local development, tolerance, and alliances. Ancient palaces were destroyed, and Persian gardens were disemboweled and left to ruin. The ingenious irrigation systems were abandoned, and large swathes of Persia became arid.

As an example of the Islamic lack of respect for the ancient Iranian aesthetics, learning, and culture, the Caliph Umar had this to say in response to the general (Arab Commander Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas) when asked what should be done with the libraries of books at Ctesiphon (Tyspwn) in Iraq (Khvârvarân):

"If the books contradict the Qur'an, they are blasphemous. On the other hand, if they are in agreement, they are not needed."

The books were subsequently thrown into the Euphrates River. Sometimes human persecution was added to material destruction to ensure that people became illiterate and forgot their ancient culture after one generation. Certain Arabic rulers killed all educated Persians, such as priests, writers, and historians to eliminate a particular way of thinking and living. Unfortunately, the Islamic conquest of Persia was in certain instances associated with mass murders and an ancient form of ethnic cleansing.

But, in terms of religious conversion, the Arabs took their time because the adoption of Islam was a complex and multidimensional affair. Many non-Muslims were given the option of converting to Islam (particularly prisoners-of-war), but the process was so slow that by the turn of the millennium, Zoroastrianism was still evident. Strangely, Islam spread best into the deepest parts of Iran—the province of Khorasan—and this region would serve as one of the epicenters during Islam's golden age in later centuries. (Muslim missionaries to the Khorasan region were particularly encouraged during the Umayyad Caliphate era.)

From Khorasan, Islam spread into the Turkic tribes of Central Asia, furthering its spread west. Muslim missionary work existed side-by-side with the other faiths of Iran while still chipping away at their essential fabric of beliefs. The Islamic system wasn't vastly different from Zoroastrianism, but the Islamic law code (*Sharia*) that accompanied it was a significantly new addition that would begin to alter the social fabric of Iran. Christians, Buddhists, and Jews also continued in Iran until at least the 10th century, at which point most Iranians were adherents of Islam.[96]

Pockets of the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism remained, particularly in the areas south of the Caspian Sea where Parthian and White Hun nobles continued to fight the Arabs into the time of the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750 CE). In these ancient Median lands, Zoroastrianism and ancient Persian culture and court customs remained for about a century after the Arabic conquest. Although Iran was forced to accept a different religion, some historians describe how, across broader Iran, its true culture remained largely intact. Islam simply added a new layer to the Iranian landscape.

In some instances, the Arabs copied the local culture, such as minting coins in an identical style to those of the Sassanid Empire and keeping the governance boundaries and administrative hierarchy. Historical records also suggest a dichotomy in which the leaders of the first two caliphates ensured protection of the non-Muslims and clarified that they shouldn't be taxed beyond endurance. (This kindness was not, however, extended to the Zoroastrian priests, who paid extra taxes and were persecuted or at least humiliated.) Once the dust of conquest had settled, ancient Iranian literature filtered through into that of the Islamic poets, and what had not been destroyed in the madness of conquest was translated into Arabic and modern Persian. So, as much as the Arabs forced themselves upon the Iranians, the Iranians in turn influenced the Arabs by adding a strange new dimension to Arabic culture through the newest religion of the empire, Islam.

The Islamic conquest was the final event that contributed to the condensed geographic version of Iran we know today. The limits of the greater kingdom had naturally shrunk with each new conquest. As Islam became the region's dominant religion, Iran's borders contracted, giving way to the rise of other nations along its perimeters. With the European colonialism of the 19th and 20th centuries, followed by the Second World War, Iran's original extent was carved away by superpowers such as the United Kingdom and Russia. To the west, the Tigris-Euphrates River Basin eventually became part of Iraq, and

Iran’s western extent became the Zagros Mountains. To the northeast, Central Asia was divided up according to clanship, and the former kingdoms of the ancient nomads were separated forever from Iran. Iran became the Iranian Plateau and the Zagros Mountains—the true, unwavering origin of the precious Iranian identity.

The successes of the ancient Iranian Empires were not entirely lost when the kingdom and its dependents became Islamized. Rather, remnants of the ancient elements of these civilizations were absorbed into the new Islamic culture and society. Persian culture formed the basis of the Islamic culture that replaced it, just as Elamite culture had been the basis of the Persian Empire. This ancient Iranian culture eventually spread outwards to influence all corners of the Muslim world during the Islamic golden age from the 8th to the 13th centuries.

PART FOUR: Ancient Iran: A Thematic Approach

Chapter 12-Art, Culture, and Archaeology

Archaeological DNA testing on skeletons dating to c. 8000 BCE in the Zagros Mountains has proved a distinction between these and human skeletons dating to a few thousand years later in modern-day Turkey. This means that the ancient Iranians evolved/originated separately from their neighbors in Assyria. The persistent distinctiveness of the Zagros people, or earliest Iranians, contributes to their unknown origins and mysterious beginnings. The people and culture seemed to spring from nowhere in western Iran, added to over the next millennia by Aryan immigrations.

Some of the oldest forms of writing in the world date back to the ancient Middle and Near East. These languages began as a series of unintelligible pictograms and evolved into cuneiform—a type of writing still considerably pictorial but sophisticated enough to be assigned sounds. “The Table of the Lion” is one of the most important sources, enabling translation of ancient Elamite. The multilingual text tablet includes Akkadian (a known and deciphered language), a contemporary Indus Valley script, and Linear Elamite. The Behistun Inscription is another source that enabled historians to decipher the proto-Persian language to an extent, although Linear Elamite is still not entirely understood.

[16] The Cyrus Cylinder with Akkadian Cuneiform script. All cuneiform scripts from ancient Iraq and Iran were similar, including Elamite cuneiform and the later versions of Persian cuneiform (Old, Middle, and New Persian).

Old Persian took over from the Elamite language and lasted until the classical era of c. 300 BCE. It naturally evolved into Middle Persian (Pahlavi), used especially during the Sasanian era. The Persian language proved particularly

enduring overall. During the Arab conquest, the Persian Empire continued speaking Middle Persian, although by the Umayyad era, Arabic had broadly taken hold. However, Persian persisted and evolved into New Persian—a version of Persian with heavy Arabic influences, particularly for religious phraseology. Arabic had a stronger influence on the written language of ancient Iran, however. The old Pahlavi scripts that drew their origins from the Achaemenid era became an altered form of Arabic. New Persian (Dari) has been in existence from c. $8^{th}/9^{th}$ century of the Common Era and evolved through three stages into the Contemporary Persian spoken in Iran today.

The early Elamites were master sculptors and metalworkers. Pottery unearthed near Susa dating from before the Uruk era is far superior to that produced in Mesopotamia at the same time. Common artifacts of ancient Mesopotamia and Elam are cylinder seals, which are cylindrical seals proving ownership or communicating information. Like stamp seals using ink or wax, these seals were rolled onto wet clay to make a lasting imprint. The cylinders were carved from stone or semi-precious stones such as jasper, chlorite, hematite, obsidian, amethyst, lapis lazuli, and carnelian. Although these stamps originated as ring and amulet seals, most Near Eastern cultures eventually used cylindrical seals. These impression seals were a few centimeters in length and height when impressed and had a hole running through them so they could be worn on a necklace.

[17] A cylinder seal (left) with its modern impression (right). "Worshipper with an animal offering seated before a deity." Dating: Middle Elamite (c. 1480-1450 BCE) on Apatite stone Dimensions: 15/16 × 7/16 × 7/16 in. (2.4 × 1.2 × 1.2 cm)

The cultures of Elam, Media, Persia, and other surrounding kingdoms of their eras intermingled and were woven through their arts, attire, and architecture.

For example, while a Median script has not been uncovered, historians believe the ancient Persian cuneiform to be the self-same writing as Median cuneiform texts. Also, Deioces' palace at Ecbatana bears an uncanny resemblance to the palaces of Susa. The palace complex was situated on a hill with seven circles of walls surrounding the buildings. The battlements were painted in bright colors, and the innermost two perimeters were covered in silver and gold. A pillared audience hall was also a signature structure in the Persian and proto-Persian cultures. Evidence of these halls has been found at many of the main archaeological sites. Sometimes there seems to be little function to these halls except as a space for the kings and governors to receive people and as a splendid display of power and wealth.

Beautiful and intricate artifacts have been uncovered throughout ancient Iran. In about 2000 BCE, bronze dominated the craft scene, and multitudes of bronze houseware, figurines, and jewelry provide insight into the Elamite's idea of life, beauty, and religion. Ancient Susa was known for its buff and redware ceramics, and Fars was associated with Kaftari ware, which was decorated earthenware ceramics. Buff ware was a pottery style using fine, light clays, and redware was an earthenware that used red clays. Grayware was also uncovered, which is similar to buff ware. In the archaeology of Fars, Kaftari became the name used to define a period in the history of the region (c. 2200-1600 BCE).

The earthenware was sometimes decoratively painted (normally with black paint) and was sometimes left plain. There is, however, archaeological confusion over which artifacts come from Mesopotamia and ancient Iran since the cultures overlapped for millennia, both through association and through trade. For example, the pottery of Susa III is substantially different from that of Susa II, which is contemporary with Uruk-era deposits (c. 3500-3100 BCE). Susa III is comparable to the Early Dynastic I Mesopotamian period (c. 3100-2800 BCE). By the Islamic era, ceramics had evolved to include glazed ware and lusterware (the addition of a metallic oxide coating). The glazed ware can also be found within the Sasanian period.

Besides ceramics, excavated Elamite artifacts include stone tablets of writing, metal objects, rhytons (goblets), stone-worked objects, and mud buildings. Iranian symbology and belief systems are repeatedly seen in these remains. For example, the Simurgh is a mythical bird in Iranian legends similar to a phoenix, griffon, or the mythological Huma[97] bird. Evidence of the Simurgh spread to regions within Byzantium and appears upon many surfaces and

beautiful objects. The Oxus treasure, in particular, is a collection of almost two hundred gold and silver objects and a further two hundred coins from the Achaemenid era. These intricately designed items were discovered near the Oxus River in the late 19th century. There are believed to have been many more original pieces. Examples of this hoard are griffon-headed bracelets, miniature horses and chariots, human and animal figurines (including mythical creatures), jewelry, and miniature gold decorated plaques. The Oxus collection could have been the stash of a temple that received votive offerings, but this cannot be confirmed.

[18] Example of a proto-Elamite artifact. This is a striding godlike figure with ibex horns.

[19] A Sassanid silver plate with a Simurgh.

[20] Samples from the Oxus treasure. (top): a golden bracelet with griffon heads. (bottom): a collection of coins (medallions) and emblems.

Numismatics, or the study of ancient coins, has proved to be the most important source of information regarding the political and kingship changes in ancient Persia. As each new king or dynasty took command, he minted a new set of coins with his profile image and the year of reign. Numismatics has enabled historians to reconstruct leadership changes more easily than king lists, which are sometimes confusing. The information available on stone reliefs and inscriptions has confirmed the story told by ancient coins.

Archaeologists excavating ancient Iran have needed to cease excavations many times because of the impact of contemporary wars. Over and above this, the ancient sites and artifacts are often at risk during war-torn periods, and it has been difficult to protect ruins and temple complexes. Ancient Iran has a wealth of archaeological sites and tels (tals, tells, or settlement mounds). One of the most well-known sites is Naqsh e-Rustam—the site of the tombs of the four Achaemenid kings: Darius I, Xerxes I, Artaxerxes I, and Darius II.[98] (Iran has twenty-six UNESCO World Heritage Sites, with many more on the tentative list.)

Eight gigantic rock reliefs were cut into the cliff faces below the tombs. The most impressive of these is the one of Shapur I the Sasanian humiliating the

Roman emperors before him, Valerian and Phillip “the Arab” (r. 244-249 CE), who was born in Syrian Arabia. In a more elaborate version of this relief at Bishapur,[99] Roman Emperor Gordian III (r. 238-244) lies dead at the horse’s feet. (The fate of Gordian has not been resolved except that he died on a campaign into Sasanian Mesopotamian lands, never to return home.) Behind Shapur I’s horse, the priest, Kartir, is saluting the king in the traditional Iranian nomadic style, which people still use today in the Zagros Mountains. The salute is an enclosed right fist with the thumb wrapped over the fist. The priestly part of the relief was added later during the reign of Bahram II.

Artifacts discovered at ancient Anshan (Tal-i Malyan) prove a constant occupation of Anshan from the mid-6th century BCE until the Islamic era. The evidence unearthed includes pottery kilns, ceramics, coinage, art, animal bones, and botanical and mineral samples.

The first city of the Sassanids, Gur, was entirely circular in shape, a design copied from the Parthians. The Iranian historian Tabari (discussed below) confirms that the city existed before the Sasanians ascended the Persian throne. Defensive walls were constructed ten kilometers (six miles) around the perimeter of the center of the city because the Sassanids would have been very concerned about defense in the early part of their reign. To add to Gur’s protection, the Firuzabad Plain on which the city was built is enclosed in a ring of mountains with only two narrow gorges leading to the settlement. The surrounding walls of Gur include a 35-meter-wide (38-yard) defensive ditch. The city itself was two kilometers (1.2 miles) in diameter, divided into three concentric circles with twenty radial walls bisecting the circles (creating 61 individual settlement sectors). The core circle was 450 meters (492 yards) in diameter and contained the official buildings as well as the fire temple sacred to Zoroastrians. Four gates opened into the city from the north, south, east, and west. Like many ancient Iranian cities, it contained a central tower, or mil, standing thirty meters (33 yards) high in its very center.

The ancient city of Susa in the Zagros Mountains has been the sight of nearly continuous archaeological excavations since the late 19th century CE. This urban node has produced the greatest wealth of historical artifacts from early Iran. Straddling the Shavur River, the archaeological site of Susa contains layers of history covering more than five thousand years. This history includes the Elamite, Achaemenid, and Parthian eras and reveals urban settlements of administrative buildings, palaces, religious buildings, private

residences, and monuments. Some noteworthy sites include Artaxerxes' and Darius' palaces, an area known as the acropolis (the eroded clay extrusion/hill beside which excavations were done), the Apadana (audience hall of Darius the Great, a 36-columned hypostyle hall), and also the Great Gate[100] of Susa (on the east side, reminiscent of the Gate of All Nations from Persepolis). A statue of Darius the Great once graced the entrance to the Great Gate; it was uniquely carved from Egyptian greywacke stone and includes hieroglyphic script. (The statue could have been retrieved from Egypt after a revolt.)

Other excavations in the Iranian provinces of Khuzestan, Fars, Lorestan, and Kerman have been far shorter and less intense than the methodical peeling back of layers that has slowly revealed Susa over the millennia. Another important site is Tepe Sialk in the northern Zagros province of Isfahan. Tepe Sialk is the location of the only intact Proto-Elamite ziggurat. The site has also yielded pottery that dates back to the 5th millennium before the Common Era, the first examples of tablets containing Proto-Elamite writing, and some of the oldest cylinder seals.

The architecture of the ancient royal capitals of Iran borrowed influences from the furthest corners of the empires and also influenced the architecture of empires to come. The sculptures of the Achaemenid Empire were largely Assyrian, and the masonry technique was borrowed from the Ionians (Western Anatolia). The tombs of ancient Iranian kings resembled the Elamite religious ziggurats and incorporated architectural elements from some of their vassal kingdoms, such as Urata and Assyria.

As the ancient Persians swallowed up surrounding lands and infiltrated their cities, they morphed to adopt the local customs, cultures, and religions and so became part of the very landscape they conquered. Similarly, when Iranians fled east into India after the Arab invasion and defeat of King Yazdegerd III in 651 CE, the Persians adopted the language, dress, food, and customs of the local Hindu population. In this way, the Persians came to influence, and be influenced by, the widest possible geographic and cultural extent of any empire the world has known. They practiced true globalization, which was not a natural phenomenon in the imperial world.

Herodotus wrote in his *Histories* that the Persians were masters of altering their culture to that of their vassal states:

"There is no nation which so readily adopts foreign customs as the Persians.

Thus, they have taken the dress of the Medes, considering it superior to their own; and in war they wear the Egyptian breastplate. As soon as they hear of any luxury, they instantly make it their own."

The ancient Iranians' habit of using the strengths of their subjugated nations against them led their armies to adopt the best and most advanced weapons and strategies of warfare over their periods of domination.

But the ancient Iranians were also unique in their application of ideas, technologies, and artistry. Pasargadae was an individual and groundbreaking garden city for its time. It was the first example of ancient Persian palatial architecture on the Iranian Plateau and set an example for monuments that came later, such as those of Persepolis. Another example is Persian fairness and lawmaking, which were the foundations of a large and peaceful empire. Darius the Great, in particular, wanted to be remembered as a great lawgiver. Dual layers of law formed the cornerstones of Iranian vassal states. Local law was based on regional, indigenous customs, while a Persian Imperial Law ensured the overarching authority of the Persian king and Iranian judges, or *data-bar*.

The sources of Iranian history were scanty up until the Common Era. Most sources preceding the advent of Islam are not entirely trustworthy and originated outside of Persia itself. Many classical Mediterranean writers, as mentioned, provided some idea of the situation and events that unfolded from the Achaemenids onwards. The Babylonian stone tablets have proved invaluable in piecing together the history of ancient Iran. One of the most important of these Babylonian Chronicles is arguably the Nabonidus Chronicle, regarding the reign of Babylonian King Nabonidus (r. 556-539 BCE). This chronicle covers the reign of Cyrus the Great and his overthrow of Babylonia, as well as the founding of the Achaemenid Empire.

Another of these chronicles is the Diadochi Chronicle, which records the events of the Mesopotamian Hellenistic era. King Nabonidus also left several foundation cylinders behind. Like the Cyrus Cylinder, they were political and religious "white papers" reproduced for inscriptions all around his kingdom. Four Nabonidus cylinders have been uncovered to date, including the Nabonidus Cylinder of Sippar, discovered in the city of the same name (just north of Babylon) a few years before Cyrus conquered the area.

Some of the other Greco-Roman writers and historians who contributed to information on the Persians were Cicero, Dinon, Diodorus, Justin, Siculus,

Josephus, Hieronymous, Quintus Curtius Rufus, Cleitarchus, Appian, and Strabo. Most of these writers recorded information centuries after the events occurred and borrowed from previous authors to accumulate facts—as well as fanciful tales. Since so many documents were lost and destroyed through history, these writers at least provide some idea of the events that occurred in ancient Iran. For instance, Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE) was a Roman statesman, lawyer, and scholar who borrowed much of his writings from the Greek Dinon. Dinon, or Deinon (c. 360-340 BCE), was a Greco chronicler who wrote about the Persian Empire, and his works pick up where Ctesias leaves off.

The Hebrew and Christian Bibles often documented the ancient history of Iran. Many of the books of these religious works speak about characters and events of Iran since the ancient territory played such a crucial role throughout the advent of the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Cyrus the Great, in particular, is mentioned twenty-two times in the Old Testament of the Bible, wherein he is highly praised.

In the Christian Bible, the Book of Isaiah refers to Cyrus the Great and predicted his birth as a powerful leader and his involvement in liberating the Jews. The Book of Daniel describes the invasion of Babylon as swift and orchestrated on the night of a great feast when the Babylonians were not sufficiently on guard. Daniel suggests that there was little resistance or bloodshed upon the Persians' infiltration, but he does state that the king of Babylon, Nabonidus, was killed. (Other sources state that the Babylonian king was merely captured.) The books of Ezra and Chronicles confirm that Cyrus liberated the Jews to return to Jerusalem and begin its reconstruction after successive invasions by Babylonians and Assyrians. The books of Jeremiah, Haggai, and Zechariah also make many references to Cyrus and his supposed chosen role by God to lead and liberate the Jews.

Like the classical writers, Arabic writers documenting the events of ancient Persia recorded facts sometimes centuries after they'd occurred. Before the conquest of Iran by the Muslims, there aren't obvious sources from the Arabian Peninsula, although a few postdated works shed light on the Islamic conquest of the Sasanian Empire. Al-Tabari (839-923 CE) was a historian and religious commentator who lived in Iran and specifically contributed to thinking around the Quran. Although born in Iran, he may have been of Persian or Iranian descent. His chronicle, *History of the Prophets and Kings* (*Tarikh al-Tabari*) is an Islamic historical compendium in which he discusses

(among many other things) the Arabian conquest of Persia, the Sassanids, Byzantines, and other kingdoms, as well as key battles, such as al-Qadisiyyah, in detail.

Another Muslim writer was Ferdowsi (Abdul-Qasem Ferdowsi Tusi, c. 940-1019/25 CE), a famous Persian poet and the author of the *Book of Kings* (*Shahnameh* or *Shahnama*). Shahnameh is one of the defining ancient poems that sheds light on the cultures of the time and provides retrospective information on historical events. Ferdowsi was born an Iranian in the Khorasan province under the Samanid Empire and was part of the *dehqan* class of landowning aristocrats. The *Shahnameh*, written for the sultan of one of the Turkic tribes, is an epic (100,000 lines of poetic text) that laid the foundation for Greater Iran's history and mythology until the Islamic conquest. It is regarded as a literary masterpiece and is intrinsic to the ethnic roots of Iran. In terms of historical content, the poem mostly describes the Sassanids and their fall to the Arab Empire. But it also discusses the Arsacid dynasty of Parthia and the time of Alexander the Great to some extent. Most importantly, the *Shahnameh* described the evolution of Zoroastrianism from its origins to the last Sasanian Emperor. The epic is considered Zoroastrian in its moral message and religious rectitude and has been condemned and criticized by Muslim leaders of Iran.

Iranian influences in art, culture, and archaeology have been responsible for an astounding number of global cultural influences, from weapons and warfare to governance, arts, gardening, textiles, games, and sports. Many modern households cannot do without a Persian carpet embroidered in the ancient style of detailed scenes or geometric patterns. The Persian bathhouse was another facet of the sophisticated Iranian culture carried worldwide. Persian baths were often public places and were imitated by the Hellenic empires that had become entwined with Persia. Along with natural hot springs, bathing was considered a ritualistic and healing activity. Bathhouses were important places for gathering and socializing. They were open to rich and poor alike for a small fee and included steam rooms as well as hot and cold baths. They could be found in the urban areas and large rural towns or villages, with wealthier people potentially having their own at home.

Overall, the ancient Iranians were not good recordkeepers of history and political events except for bas-reliefs and inscriptions at strategic points throughout the empire as messages to their subjects. If their activities were recorded, they have been lost, destroyed, or remain unexcavated. It is

unfortunate that so much of the Iranian story comes from ancient historians outside of the empire, but the possibility of archaeologists uncovering more information on this extraordinary civilization remains a tantalizing prospect.

Chapter 13-Religion and Myths

The migrations of the ancient Iranians in and out of Iran formed the source of many myths and legends and are particularly identifiable in naming conventions. Pars became Fars during the Arab era and remains the province of Fars to this day. Farsi is the modern Arabic name used to describe the Persian language, and the ancestors of the Zoroastrian refugees who fled to India during Islamization use the name Parsi as their ethnic name.

A pantheon of gods dominated ancient Iraq and Iran before Zoroastrianism became the primary religion of Iran. Susiana, west of the Zagros Mountains, developed uniquely, borrowing practices and cultures from both Mesopotamia and Elam. Its inhabitants adhered to the Mesopotamian pantheon of gods, with Insusinak (Inshushinak) as the godhead and protector of Susa. The primary goddess of the city was Nanaya, to whom a significant temple was constructed in Susa. Nanaya (the Elamite equivalent of Narundi) was the goddess of love, closely associated with Inanna. Inanna was originally the Sumerian goddess of love, beauty, war, and power, but as her area of worship grew, she came to be known as Ishtar, or the “Queen of Heaven.”

The overall god Insusinak was sometimes associated within a trinity of two other gods: Napirisha and Kiririsha. Napirisha, often represented in snake form, was the god of the primordial waters and was most often connected with the area of Anshan. He was considered the “Lord of the Earth” and of mankind. Kiririsha was an Elamite goddess and the “Mother of Gods,” often associated with the god Humban. Humban was a sky god and guardian of the king and the royal family. He was also “Lord of Anshan.” Other gods and goddesses such as Pinikir, Nahhunte, Simut, Ismekarab, and Lamagal ruled over aspects of heaven and the sky, law and trade, Elam, the underworld, and the dead, respectively.

In the Cylinder of Sippar, Babylonian King Nabonidus wrote that he repaired three temples in the cities of Harran and Sippar: the sanctum of the moon god, Sin, the temple of the sun god Samas, and the shrine of the warrior goddess of water and fertility, Anahita (Anunitu). The king explained how he did this after checking the foundation cylinders of previous kings with respect to temple repairs and seemed enthusiastic to express his diligence in maintaining the temples.

It appears that the care of religious buildings and edifices was an important

task of the ancient king of Iran's geopolitical sphere of influence. This dedication bordered on a superstition that if the gods were not pleased, they would not support the reigning king. This superstition had something to do with Cyrus the Great's relatively easy conquest of Babylonia. From a military perspective, the Persian king had been expected for a decade as he swallowed up the lands around Mesopotamia. From a religious perspective, it was widely accepted that Cyrus was a chosen leader of the main Mesopotamian god Marduk (and the Hebrew's Lord God) and so could not lose. This belief probably had much to do with his virtually uncontested gain of Babylon during Nabonidus' time.

Before monotheistic religions overtook ancient Iran, the various people practiced polytheistic forms, including a multitude of beliefs. One aspect of ancient worship that the Iranians upheld for millennia was the sacred fire cult, whose origins in pagan polytheism continued into Zoroastrianism. A fire cult was identified through ruined temples in which an altar of fire was a permanent feature. The oldest example of a fire temple was found sixty kilometers (37 miles) south of Ecbatana, with similar features to the main palace settlement complex. At Istakhr in Persis, the remains of this ancient capital include a fire sanctuary for the goddess Anahita. Evidence also suggests that the chief priest was heavily involved with secular administration. The combination of religious guidance and administrative involvement probably became the norm over time, particularly during the Sasanian Empire and the time of the Zoroastrian high priest Kartir. During the Achaemenid Empire, the priests were one group of advisors to the king, but by the third century of the Common Era, the priesthood was deeply interwoven with political rulership, possibly even governing from behind the scenes.

The Magi were one Medes tribe that produced the priests for both the Median and the Achaemenid Empires. This priestly caste of Medians kept their oral and indigenous traditions alive through generations—and even through empires. Although historians are not in agreement, the Magi could potentially have been priests of the Zoroastrian religion. Within Media, there is evidence that Zoroastrianism was adopted, at least in part, by its final ruler, Astyages, and possibly by his predecessor, Cyaxares. This adoption of certain elements of formal Zoroastrianism started in the 6th century BCE, after Zarathustra's proselytizing. For about two hundred years before Zarathustra's influence, a type of Mazdaism existed in Media as a precursor to the Manichaeism of

eight hundred years later, which had similar tenets.

For ancient Iranians in general, religion formed a critically important part of their lives. Evidence of ceremony, offerings, and active worship is abundant throughout ancient Persia. The Oxus hoard of treasures is thought to have been a deposit of offerings to the local temple due to the small size of the objects and the range in quality. Some items are beautifully carved and may have been commissioned by wealthier people, while other items are cruder and may have been crafted by individuals with fewer means. This sense of devotion to religion spanned through the polytheism of Elam and into the Zoroastrianism of later eras. As an example, below is a silver cup from Fars province dating to the third millennium before the Common Era. The Linear Elamite inscription reads, *"For the Lady of Marapsha, Shumar-asu, I made this silver vase. In the Temple that will be known by my name, Humshat, I dedicated it with goodwill for you."*

[21] Silver cup made for a temple offering during the Elamite era in Fars.

The ancient Iranians created their gardens, or bagh-pairidaeza, not only for aesthetic value but also for spiritual and physical healing and as places of restoration and sanctuary. They included herbs and other healing plants, water features, and quiet places for contemplation and meditation. These

spiritual oases contrasted starkly with the conditions of the open desert and barren mountains, where the climate was extreme and ever-changing. The gardens were designed to build the internal strength of individuals as well as strengthen family and community relationships. The Achaemenid kings themselves toiled in the gardens, building structures and tending the plants. There was (and remains to this day) a strong connection between these natural settings, Zoroastrianism, and fire culture.

The sources of ancient Iranian history are inextricably bound up in myth and legend, and it's been difficult for historians to know whether the references to great individuals were in fact people or origin theories with a human face. The first known king of the imperial era of Media—Deioces—may have been a mythical figure as part of an origin theory. Arsaces I of Parthia is traced back to a variety of mythical figures, which are mostly ancient heroes of Iranian folklore and oral tradition. (Many of these figures[101] appear in works such as the *Shahnameh*.) Three known queens are believed to have ruled Persia for very short durations, and two of these were over the time of the Sasanian civil war. The third queen, Musa (r. 2 BCE-4 CE), ruled during the Parthian era and has a legendary history of being an Italian slave girl given to Phraates IV by the Roman Emperor Augustus. Once Musa had become queen and given birth to a boy, she poisoned the Persian king and announced herself and her son—Phraates V—as co-rulers. She ruled for just six years and managed to have coins with her profile minted before being deposed by the royal family.

The Greeks also provided mythical origins for Cyrus the Great as the progeny of their greatest gods. The royal lineages of ancient Iran are confusing and shrouded in suppositions. One theory claims that during the beginnings of the Achaemenid lineage, but before the Persian Empire was born under Cyrus the Great, two distinctive lines of royalty developed under one of the rulers of the greater Anshan region. Evidence suggests that the kingdom was divided to the north of Susa (Parsumash) and the southeast of Susa (Parsa) between the two princes, Cyrus I and Ariaramnes (whose lineages produced Cyrus the Great and Darius the Great, respectively).

Cyrus the Great's anticipated birth and life swirled with religious as well as mythological prophecies. He seemed to be heralded as a chosen leader of the Persian Empire long before his birth and was widely accepted as the rightful heir of the dominions he conquered. The Hebrews, in particular, believed in Cyrus as a God-given liberator and ruler, but interestingly, so did the

Mesopotamian worshippers of the Marduk cult.

As the focal point of one of the most ancient belief systems in the kingdoms that predated ancient Iran, Marduk was a widely worshipped father god or "lord" whose effigies were an integral part of the religious life and temples of Mesopotamia and the surrounding kingdoms. He was responsible for overcoming the primeval demons of evil and chaos and so became the deity of all heaven and Earth. All of humanity owed its existence to Marduk, and he controlled the destiny of kingdoms and rulers. It is no wonder that when Cyrus the Great overcame Babylon and created his Cyrus Cylinder, he specified that he was chosen by Marduk and that he had replaced the new gods instituted by Nabonidus (such as the moon god Sin) with the ancient Marduk. Supporting local, popular belief systems and cultural practices may have been a careful political strategy of Cyrus the Great. (Because history is unclear about his precise religion, it is most likely that he practiced a number of religions, including monotheistic Zoroastrianism, to appease his broad-based empire.)

The Greek historian Herodotus described a familiar legend about Cyrus the Great's anticipated birth and youth. The myth describes the Median King Astyages as having dreamt that his daughter, Mandane (Mandana), gave birth to a flood that swallowed his capital and all of Asia. He had a second dream that vines from her womb would choke his realm and all the surrounding lands. Once interpreted, it was clear to King Astyages that his daughter's son would overthrow him and his Median kingdom. He therefore married Mandane to an obscure individual of the Persian kingdom, Atradates (who became Cambyses I), to limit his future grandson's power.

However, when Cyrus was born, King Astyages ordered his servant, Harpagus, to kill the boy. Harpagus couldn't bring himself to perform the murderous act and instead handed the child to a shepherd and his wife to raise. When Cyrus was ten years old, Astyages discovered the deception and sent his grandson back to live with his parents in Persia. Astyages is then purported to have murdered his servant Harpagus' son and cooked and fed him to his own father in retribution for not carrying out his orders. This unlikely story becomes even more horrific in Herodotus' works. Regardless of its truth, the story was meant to portray certain characters as evil and others as heroic. It is also a myth that legitimizes Cyrus' claim to the Median throne and the overthrow of the Medes by the Persians.

The pantheon of the Marduk cult was described by contemporary priests as

various emanations of Marduk with multiple names (up to fifty). Marduk's consort (or wife) was Sarpanit (or Zarpanitu, the goddess of birth), and he was associated with the planet Jupiter as well as with horses, dogs, and the mythical dragon. The dragon, or Mushussu, often adorned his temples. Later, with the influence of the Semitic tribes from Chaldea and the Middle East, Marduk developed into "Bel" or "Baal," meaning simply "Lord." Although many other gods and goddesses of ancient Mesopotamia were responsible for the various aspects of daily life, it was to Marduk that people owed their entire existence as the overall god of creation. There are ancient references to Mithra, the god of oaths, and Nabu (Nebo), the god of writing and the natural world, as well as many others that became entangled with the Hellenic gods in time.

However, as the Persian Empire grew strong in the Near East, a new religion was gaining ground, unique in its monotheistic approach. Sometime between 1,500 BCE and 1,000 BCE, the visionary prophet Zoroaster, or Zarathustra, received a divine revelation from the god-figure Ahura Mazda. Ahura Mazda communicated a doctrine to Zarathustra that all human beings were compelled to take part in a divine struggle between the forces of good and evil. While Ahura Mazda represented the supreme deity of order, justice, and peace, his adversary—Angra Mainyu—was the overlord of chaos and suffering. From this revelation, the monotheistic religion of Zoroastrianism was born, forming the backbone of Persian belief systems from then on.

Historians are unsure of exactly when and how Zoroastrianism became the main religion of Iran and whether kings like Cyrus II openly and actively practiced the faith. By the reign of the Achaemenid King Artaxerxes II, the Iranian gods of the ancient pantheon, such as Mithra and the goddess Anahita, were receiving equal representation with Ahura Mazda. But history has not managed to unravel the exact meanings or associations of the ancient Iranian "pantheon of gods," and it's possible that many of the old deities were simply aspects of the overall teachings of Zoroastrianism. For instance, Mithra (or Mehr) meant "truth" and was one of a trilogy of concepts along with Rashnu ("justice") and Sraosha ("obedience") in the foundations of Iranian religion that predated but gave rise to Zoroastrianism.

Mithra (Mehr) was the Zoroastrian god of the sun, covenants, light, and oaths. This primordial god also protected the waters and oversaw the concept of truth. The Romans later adopted Mithra for their mystical sect of Mithraism, although scholars suspect that the Romans altered the original

tradition of this Iranian god into something quite different. Mithraism, or the Mithraic Mysteries, was popular with the Roman army in the first four hundred years of the Common Era. The initiation-based, esoteric order of Roman Mithraism drew a huge following that reached into all corners of the Roman Empire—as far as Africa and the United Kingdom to the west. The adherents would meet secretly in underground temples, of which many still exist. Mithraism was eliminated by early Christians and its believers persecuted because it was seen as a major rival religion to early Christianity. While the original Zoroastrian deity is not the same Mithra(s) of Imperial Rome, it is certainly another example of the extraordinary impact Iranian culture and belief systems had on surrounding and conquering cultures.

Ancient Iran was religiously tolerant until approximately the Sasanian era when the priests were becoming all-powerful and needed to use religious adherence to gain political control. For thousands of years, the Iranian belief systems existed alongside Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity. The ancestors of Parthia, like all Iranians, had practiced widespread polytheism. However, by the advent of the Parthian Empire, Zoroastrianism had clearly taken hold. Many of the leaders of the Parthian dynasties used Zoroastrian-derived names and declared their lineage to be from the Achaemenid progenitor Artaxerxes II. The Sasanian King Khosrow I reinstituted religious tolerance after a period of persecution of other religions in Persia. Although Zoroastrianism remained the state religion, the king was not concerned about believers of other faith systems and proved this when his own son converted to Christianity. Khosrow was also a great admirer of arts and literature and imported many Indian books that were translated into Parthian.

Bahram V of the Sasanian Empire was the first example of royal excess, pomp, and pageantry that would later be associated with medieval kings of Europe. He created an abundant and lively royal court that followed him wherever he went and patronized the arts, music, and literature, with many Persian written works created during his time. His nickname, Bahram-e Gur, alluded to his penchant for hunting wild animals, with *Gur* possibly referring to zebras from Africa (or the indigenous onager or wild ass, which is also known as a gur). Bahram V was also responsible for bringing the sport of equestrian polo into royal circles.

An Iranian oral traditional folklore was captured in the 10th-century compilation by Ferdowsi, the *Shahnameh*. Many heroic characters from this

epic are recognizable throughout aspects of Iran's culture: Rustam, the greatest hero of the fables (Naqsh e-Rustam is the politico-religious domain of the Persian kings), Kaveh, the blacksmith (from which the Derafsh Kaviani imperial banner evolved), Feridun (Fereydun) who was inspired to revolt by Kaveh and defeated the dragon Azhi Dahaka, and Kay Khosrow, the warrior king who ruled justly (the same names as the kings of the Sasanian Empire). Iranian mythology in general covered the origin of the world and the involvement of deities, heroes, demons, and mythological creatures to explain all aspects of the socio-political foundation of Greater Iran.

Many mythical beasts and birds were woven through the religious, political, and social lives of ancient Iranians. Hybridized creatures such as the Simurgh conveyed the Iranians' ancient symbols of the dragon, the sun, the eagle/raptor, the bull, and the lion, among others. These apotropaic combinations, similar to the sphinxes of Egypt, were used throughout Mesopotamia and Iran as symbols, to show the might of an empire or city, and to ward off evil or act as protective deities. The Lamassu (also referred to as al-adlammû, or the female version, apsasû) was a particularly poignant symbol of strength and mythical power. The combination of attributes in one creature held different meanings for each of its features. The bull showed strength, the lion royalty, the human wisdom, wings freedom, etc. Lamassus adorned the ancient palaces and are still visible guarding the Gate of All Nations at Persepolis. These beasts often appeared on the capitals (tops) of the columns of the immense pillared halls. (A similar version of the Lamassu is the gopatha.)

[22] A side-profile of a Lamassu—a reconstructed relief from a door or wall of King Sargon II's palace in Assyria (c. 716-713 BCE).

The Huma bird was a type of fire bird who laid golden eggs and taught humanity about greed, ignorance, reason, and consciousness. This exquisitely-colored, long-tailed bird was a peculiar mixture between a vulture, peacock, bird-of-paradise, and the North American mythical thunderbird. There is a theory that all mythical birds across global cultures are representative of the same principle and that these birds are one and the same.

The enormous Huma bird appears in Iranian mythology and tales as able to carry off people and livestock with ease, although it never landed on the ground and was always airborne. The concept of the Huma made its way into the later Sufi mysticism of Islam. The Sufi poem, "Mantiku't-Tayr" (Mantiq-ut-Tayr), or "The Conference of the Birds" by the Persian poet Farid ud-Din Attar of Nishapur, c. 1145-1220 CE, tells a metaphorical tale of spiritual enlightenment. The Huma bird can be found in reliefs and statues throughout Iran and was used as a double-headed standard for pillars.

The Islamic conquest of Iran laid waste to the Zoroastrian religion, although pockets of Zoroastrians continued in Greater Iran or emigrated to safer environments where they could practice their religion in peace. However, like all changes to the Persian landscape, Zoroastrianism impacted Islam as much as Islam changed Iran. Many aspects of Islam reflect the ancient Zoroastrian beliefs, such as the concept of the Chinvat Bridge. This bridge was the final crossing point of the human soul after death upon which it was judged.

Depending on the outcome of the judgment, individuals could find themselves in a version of heaven or a version of hell. Essentially, Zoroastrianism teaches good behavior, good thoughts, good words, and good deeds. Islam appears to have enveloped ancient Iranian beliefs, and possibly customs, and spread those around the world. Iranians (at least in private) remained true to their original religion of Zoroastrianism, which is why it is one the oldest surviving religions still practiced across the world today. (There are 100,000-200,000 practicing Zoroastrians in the world today; 25,000 of these are in Iran.)

Throughout the history of Iran, each new layer of belief borrowed from the one before it. And so, like the Iranian culture, modern-day customs can be traced back to the ancestors of the Elamites and Aryans. It seems that no matter how much ancient Iran changed, it remained fundamentally unchanged.

Chapter 14-Agriculture and Trade

Much of the early Iranian and Elamite history comes from the Mesopotamian cultures to the west that were more meticulous about keeping records. During certain periods in the Fertile Crescent, there was an agricultural surplus, but at other times, changing climates and soil conditions sent early peoples of Iraq to their neighboring civilizations in search of food to barter. Besides food, the Mesopotamians were particularly interested in the natural resources of the Iranian Plateau—wood, metals, and precious stones. The records of the Mesopotamian military campaigns to acquire resources have provided information on the geography and history of Elam. These campaigns mostly took the form of raids, although they were rarely all-out conquests.

The Zagros Mountains and Mesopotamia have been identified as the sites of some of the world's oldest farms. Examples of the earliest evidence of wine production and storage have been discovered in the Zagros, dating back to the 6th century BCE. Human DNA testing has proved that the Elamites spent many thousands of years in relative evolutionary isolation before the rise of Mesopotamian empires. Therefore, historians have concluded that any advancements within their civilization came from within. As proto-farmers, their technological advancements and agricultural methods (such as farming tools, irrigation canals, and pasture management) would have been largely of their own making. There is further evidence that the Zagros people moved east into Greater Iran and the northwestern extremity of the Indian subcontinent, taking their livestock, crops, and methodologies with them.

Although the Elamites may have migrated their know-how eastward, there is clear archaeological evidence that people of the broader Fertile Crescent practiced significant intra-regional trade—including with Elam—particularly in agricultural tools. Although historians can confirm significant involvement among the original cultures of what eventually became the Persian Empire, they also confirm that it was not necessarily a melting pot of cultures—many peoples purposefully remained independent. This independence remains unclear but explains why the main means of cultural mixing occurred when one tribe conquered another and chose to occupy their lands long-term.

There is also proof that Elam traded extensively with the Indus River Valley cultures of the northwestern Indian subcontinent. This trade is likely to have been both overland on the Silk Roads and other routes to China, as well as via sea, including the maritime trade routes of Africa and Asia. Artifacts

found in Susa dating to the Old Elamite period include oceanic products such as seashell jewelry made from species characteristic of the Indus Valley coastline, as well as other items specific to Indus River Valley cultures. Evidence of trade between the Indus and Elam is seen to diminish after the end of the second millennium BCE in tandem with the disappearing ancient cultures of the Indus River Valley.

The Persian Gulf (Lower Sea) served as the main maritime thoroughfare that linked ancient Iran with Mesopotamia, Arabia, the Indian subcontinent, and ultimately the rest of the world. What the Greco-Roman world referred to as the Erythraean Sea is the modern-day Arabian Sea, but in ancient times, it could have equated to the Indian Ocean. The ancient Iranian navy was the smallest division of its military force and was based in the Lower Sea (Persian Gulf). The navy dated from approximately the Achaemenid Empire, but the Persians also drew on the strength of the Phoenicians[102] in late antiquity to help defend the trade routes to their south.

Both the Achaemenids and the Sasanians had an active navy that loosely spread around the extent of ancient Persia—the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea, Aegean Sea, Nile River, Red Sea, Erythraean Sea, Gulf Coast, Arabian Sea, and the Persian Gulf. The maritime network included a presence along the major riverways of the empire, as well. There were Persian naval bases on the Indian subcontinent and possibly as far as China during the Sasanian period. The naval network formed the backbone for maritime trade, particularly in times of peace. The Sasanians, specifically, primarily used their navy for trade, having secured the borders of their lands. The Sassanids didn’t directly control the eastern ports of the Mediterranean or Egypt, so their seafaring activities were mostly limited to the seas to their south.

Various vessels were used over time for naval activities and trade, including small sailing dhows, larger sailing boats, rowing boats mostly for warfare, and various other boats either for direct warfare or for transporting goods and troops. Most Persian boats were commissioned further afield, such as in Phoenicia. The vessels could carry about 300 troops, at least half of which were rowers. Goods vessels followed the troops with supplies, food, water, or even horses (horse transporters, or *hippagogoi*).

The trireme, or “three-rower,” boat consisted of a two-layered galley where three rows of oarsmen could be active at once. (These vessels included sails and rudders.) The swift and effective triremes played a significant role in the Persian Wars and were first commissioned by Cambyses. Later, the

Hellenistic quinqueremes, or “five-rowers,” became popular. These were the heaviest of the warships and often headed a fleet of three-rowers and four-rowers (quadriremes). The galley-style ships were depicted on coinage of the era. The approximate size of the navy ranged from 300 to 1,200 vessels with over 50,000 rowers and many thousands of sailors and marines. (The Persian naval force reached its peak in c. 480 BCE.)

But the ancient Iranians were mostly land-bound. Whether in the hills, fertile valleys, or plains of ancient Iran, the Iranians used the landscape to its fullest. Capitals like Pasargadae were built on wide-open plains through which large, winding rivers flowed. The Polvar River near Pasargadae contained at least eight dams for water storage and usage within the qanat systems. The conqueror Cyrus the Great was not only well known for practicing religious tolerance and instituting human rights but also for developing technologies to assist with local economic development, agricultural support, and sustainable societies. An example of his contribution to local infrastructure was the reintroduction of the qanat system of underground canals. The qanats (or karez) diverted water from distant rivers or underground sources such as aquifers to towns and agricultural lands for pastures, livestock, and crops.

The qanats could become exceptionally long[103] and so were separated at regular intervals by shafts with several functions but, most importantly, left surface evidence of these canals for archaeologists. The qanats are easily identifiable from the surface and with remote sensors because of the shaft holes that followed the water courses. Once the qanats reached their destination, the water was brought to the surface in open canals leading to ponds that formed oases in arid areas. Evidence of qanats dates back to the third millennium BCE, but they seemed to lose popularity over time.

Many of the ancestors of the Persians lived in extremely arid regions where generational climate change made settling difficult, if not impossible. Media and the Zagros Mountains had always enjoyed good rainfall, and historical evidence shows many examples of qanats east of the Zagros Mountains, which spread once the Persians had overthrown Media. This channeling of water was so effective that the kings of Persia had abundant water for their decorative gardens and palatial ponds. The Achaemenid kings proudly described themselves as gardeners, or *roi-jardinier*, and the Persian gardens (or *pairi-daeza*) were created based on their concept of heaven. (The word “pairi-daeza” also informed the English word “paradise.”) Cyrus the Great was known to be a prolific gardener.

The qanat system became so widespread that the presence of these canals eventually marked out the course of the ancient Silk Road trade routes. From Mesopotamia to Iran, Parthia, Bactria, and all the way to China, the qanats facilitated the movement of people, and therefore goods, throughout the Near and Far East. Eventually, the movement of Islamic people spread the construction of these underground canals as far west as Morocco, throughout North Africa, and north into Syria.

Approximately 20,000 qanats are still in use today within Iran. An existing example of the canal system is the Sasanian Shushtar Historical Hydraulic System in Khuzestan—which became listed on the UNESCO[104] World Heritage Sites in 2009. Built around the island city of Shushtar, this interconnected series of dams, bridges, canals, and irrigation infrastructure is a massive hydraulic system for channeling water. The hydraulic system could date as early as Darius the Great's time, although most of the elements were constructed during the Sasanian era, sometimes using Roman labor. The irrigation system provides water to local urban nodes and nearby agricultural lands on the plains.

[23] A panoramic view of the Sasanian Shushtar Historical Hydraulic System.

Another noteworthy "invention" of the ancient Persians that they spread throughout their empire was the yakhchal (yakhchāl). The yakhchal is the world's first known refrigeration system. This simple but brilliantly effective invention translates as "ice-pit." The yakhchals were domed structures of baked clay[105] that contained an internal subterranean storage space. The yakhchals used the evaporation system to cool the contents of the storage area, which was usually ice. Sometimes qanats were fed through these domes in desert areas to create the ice. These ice-pit structures could be attached to individual homes or remain isolated in desert areas and are still used in former Persian territories today.

[24] A modern-day yakhchal in Iran. These structures could reach up to 18 meters (11 yards) high and contain up to 5,000 cubic meters (180,000 cubic feet) in internal volume.

The ancient Iranians are believed to be some of the most powerful influencers of their time. One of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World is the Hanging Gardens of Babylon—where greenery and flowers adorned the city and hung from terraces among cascades of water, fountains, and statues. Many historians believe the Babylonians got their original ideas from the Medes of the Zagros Mountains. A legend tells that Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 BCE) built the hanging gardens to please his Median wife, Amytis (daughter of Cyaxares), who missed her home in the Zagros Mountains. The Athenians copied the Persian styles during the Hellenic period and the empires that followed.

The bagh-pairidaeza (paradise gardens) that the Persians constructed throughout their empire became legendary and were noted in many ancient works, particularly the Hellenes of the Mediterranean. The baghs could be formal or informal, and the more formal structures spread to places like India, where the geometric designs of garden arrangements can be seen in front of some ancient palaces. In time, these gardens grew to include wild game, birds, and fish in abundance, both for viewing and hunting. These gardens were not only beautiful and spiritual but also functional. The Achaemenid kings and armies would collect plants and animals on their various military and diplomatic travels to be included in the baghs. In so doing, they created orchards and food gardens in their towns and royal capitals.

Along with a widespread legal system throughout the Persian Empire, the

Iranian kings enforced a system of taxation, and wealth in ancient Iran was heavily linked to lands and agriculture. In a sense, the Persian Empire was a feudal one, with absentee landlords exacting rents and local laborers tending the lands and producing food. The ancient Iranians were also very aware that by facilitating trade, they were creating a lasting source of wealth throughout their kingdoms. The creation and maintenance of an imperial road network and protection along these highways and byways ensured the regular passage of goods in and out of the empire for trade.

The Persians sponsored seaborne trade, and the state financed ocean trade routes and vessels as well as exploratory expeditions in search of new trading avenues and goods from exotic lands. Darius the Great created the first version of the Suez Canal by linking the River Nile to the Red Sea via a manmade channel. This waterborne connection linked the western extremities of the Persian Empire to the far eastern ocean corridors, and various ports across the Persian Empire were developed. To further encourage trade, a standardized system of weights and measures was introduced across the empire, and coinage bearing the king's name was the commodity introduced to encourage economic activity and the exchange of goods.

An ancient banking system was uncovered in Babylonia. "The House of Murashu and Sons of Nippur" acted as middlemen in the taxation system and as money-lenders. All evidence suggests that the ancient Iranians, particularly during the Achaemenid Empire, had sophisticated and efficient methods of managing and growing their resource base. But like the fate of all imperial systems, corruption, hyperinflation, political interference, and instability also led to an eventual decline in a once-booming economy.

Under the Parthian ruler Mithradates II, Han China—and specifically Emperor Wu-ti—negotiated a trade deal with Parthia c. 115 BCE. This deal would form the foundations of the infamous Silk Trade route that had existed in one form or another for millennia but would henceforth take on a more formal role in east-west international relations. Archaeologists have also uncovered evidence of a strongly feudal land-based system punctuated with urban nodes during the Parthian era. A major difference between the Parthians and the Achaemenids is that the Parthians used slaves in abundance. Free peasants also permeated the landscape, mostly congregating in small villages.

History also suggests that the nomadic tribes bordering ancient Iran, including the Parni, may not have been entirely nomadic but often resorted to

sedentary farming. The old tribal traditions began changing with Parthian King Mithradates I, as the immensity of Parthia led to an increasing number of cities and an economy that increasingly relied on trade. As with the Persians before them, Parthian handicrafts were an integral part of life and held both aesthetic and economic value, as they could be exchanged or sold.

Maritime trade was also a crucial part of the Parthian Empire. The most important port at Charax Spasinu on the Persian Gulf linked Arabia and Iran to India, Africa, and Asia. (Charax Spasinu was the capital of Characene, located at the head of the Persian Gulf in modern-day Iraq. It was known as Alexandria and Antiochia under various empires.) The Euphrates became a system of canals for the dual purposes of irrigation and trade, and the various Persian Empires acted as middlemen for this prolific trade network, growing wealthy from taxes and tariffs. Before Islamization, the agricultural and trade economies were the most important to the Iranian Empires. Local economic development and trade ensured the survival of the Persian empires for centuries. However, the Arabs were more interested in religious conversion and subservience to Islamic laws, and much of the wealth and splendor of ancient Iran began disappearing after the 7th century.

Conclusion

The word “Persia” conjures scenes of luxurious and colorful royal palace courts within desert oases, flourishing gardens filled with flowers and exotic birds and beasts, beautiful women in flowing robes, brave men on horseback clad in expensive armor, and rolling plains, mountains, and rivers as far as the eye can see. But between the abundance of glamor, overflowing banquet halls, and rising incense was an empire—or rather, a series of empires—that were savvier and more successful than any in history. The Persian kings laid royal roads from the Middle East to India, bolstered an immense trading empire from the Mediterranean to China, encouraged a diversity of ethnicities and religions, and ruled not as tyrannical overlords but as beneficent sovereigns over petty kingdoms.

The father of the Persian Empire, Cyrus the Great, ruled with such fairness and magnanimity that he garnered the love, respect, and loyalty of his acquired lands. Whereas many rulers and empires before and after him used fear to hold their territories, Cyrus maintained peace and stability throughout his kingdoms during his lifetime—while creating the largest empire ever known. Cyrus abolished slavery and emancipated repressed people over the vast extremities of his attached principalities; he left written records of policies that have formed the basis of modern-day global human rights charters. His people loved him, his enemies respected him, and the first people of the Abrahamic religions—the Hebrews—believed him to be a chosen envoy of their God.

However, it must be remembered that before the Persians became a military and political mega-force, they were an organized politico-religious society based upon trade, agriculture, and craftmanship. The ancestors of the Persians—the Elamites of the Zagros Mountains—birthed the culture from which Cyrus and his people drew their strength. Mixed with the blood of the mysterious Aryan races that moved south onto the Iranian Plateau, the peoples of ancient Iran developed separately from those of neighboring ancient Mesopotamia (Iraq). The original cuneiform script of the Proto-Elamites remains undeciphered, and the true origins of the Proto-Iranians are lost within layers of history that formed this ancient story.

Some interloping empires, such as the Macedonians and Seleucids, briefly ruled over ancient Iran, but they could never maintain their grip on the immense and multicultural landscapes of the minor kingdoms. The lasting

Iranian imperial forces of the Achaemenids, Parthians, and Sasanians used a flexible and tolerant rulership style to maintain their power for centuries. Instead of imposing their politics, culture, and belief systems on their people, they wisely drew strength from the diversity and enduring philosophies of the ancient Iranian tribes. This "live and let live" approach enabled the Persian kings to extend their empire across the extraordinary expanse of the ancient Near East and facilitated economic and societal prosperity. Ancient Iran is associated with abundance, beauty, and sophistication to this day. Its lasting legacy of aesthetic architecture, art, religion, and attire is entirely balanced with the practical legacy of its bureaucratic systems, agricultural practices, and economic and infrastructural development endeavors.

Not only are ancient Iranian art and culture at the heart of many modern-day nationalities, but the Persian kings' early attitudes to rulership, human rights, religion, and justice have formed the basis of societies in the present. This final inscription of the Sasanian King Ardashir I to his son, Shapur I, encapsulates the attitude of the Persian kings who ruled over empires that spanned millennia and became worthy of the title "King of Kings":

> *"Never forget that as a king you are the protector of your religion and your country…You should be an example of piety and virtue, but without pride or ostentation…Remember my son, that the fate of the nation depends on the conduct of the individual who sits on the throne…Learn to meet the frowns of destiny with courage and fortitude, and to receive her smiles with moderation and wisdom…May your administration be such as to bring the blessing of those whom God has confided to our parental care."*

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[8] Naqsh-e Rustam. Blondinrikard Fröberg from Göteborg, Sweden, CC BY 2.0
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[10] Persepolis. *Source1:* درفش کاویانی, CC BY-SA 3.0
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[20] Oxus Treasure. *Source*: Marie-Lan Nguyen, 2012, accessed via Wikimedia Commons; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Armlet_from_the_Oxus_Treasure_I 31.116.jpg, January – March 2022.

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[1] The capital of Iran changed to Tehran after the Arab conquest of Iran in the 17th and 18th Centuries. Tehran is situated in north-central Iran and remains the official capital.

[2] This Aryan Indo-Iranian theory of migration is not universally accepted but is the most likely version of the movement of people onto the Iranian Plateau.

[3] Stretching from the Nile River in Egypt in an inverted crescent half-moon to the Persian Gulf, the Fertile Crescent was an extensive area of arable land made possible by the alluvial flood plains of several major rivers.

[4] The modern-day province of Herat in northwestern Afghanistan was historically known as Arya or Aira, in which the Parsiban (people of the Parsi) still live.

[5] Far earlier Mesopotamian settlements and peoples may have existed along the extent of the alluvial

plain that haven't yet been excavated either due to their nomadic nature or to alluvium deposits over time.

[6] Eneolithic or Aeneolithic.

[7] The earliest evidence of humans in the Zagros Mountains is from paleolithic burial remains dating to approximately 63,000-33,000 BCE.

[8] "Proto" means the earliest or most primitive version of a set of people.

[9] *Tal*, *tall*, *tel*, *tell*, and *til* refer to archaeological sites in the Near East.

[10] These people appear to be referred to by many names, such as the Martu or Tidnum, but are most well known by their biblical name of Amorites.

[11] Approximately the modern-day Middle East.

[12] Closest to modern-day Baghdad, the capital of Iraq.

[13] The exact location of Akkad is still undiscovered.

[14] Some historians cite Sargon as the earliest ruler of a world empire.

[15] The Third Dynasty of Ur.

[16] Babylon was named in clay tablets dating from the reign of Sargon of Akkad, c. 2334-2279 BCE.

[17] Also known as Chaldaeans, Kaldu, Kasdu, and Kasdimm in various languages and frequently mentioned in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible.

[18] Including the famous Etemenanki ziggurat (terraced temple) and the Ishtar Gate.

[19] The origins of the Elamites are contested, and there is no unified theory on their beginnings.

[20] Who was said to have conquered Elam in the first recorded war in history.

[21] Beyza District, Sepidan County, and 60 kilometers (37 miles) north of Shiraz, Iran.

[22] Not to be confused with the Kura Rivers of Turkey and Russia.

[23] Possibly due to a change from sedentary farming to pastoral nomadism.

[24] Situated between Kish and Uruk between the Tigris and Euphrates where the rivers gap is widest.

[25] Isin had its own king list from c. 1953 to 1730 BCE.

[26] Some records put this number at fourteen for the entire dynasty.

[27] Some historians disagree with the matriarchal lineage theory, stating that the interpretation of the title is incorrect and what some analysts interpreted as "nephews" were really the sons of the royal kings who married their sisters through incestual relationships to maintain the royal lineage.

[28] The longest single period of any ancient Babylonian power.

[29] In 2020, Francois Desset of Laboratoire Archeorient (Lyon, France) released a translation of Linear Elamite text, although his work has yet to be peer reviewed by the academic community.

[30] The later Elamite cuneiform that has been deciphered and could bear a resemblance or linkages to the Dravidian, or Dravidic, languages of India—although this language association has not been confirmed.

[31] Considered today as "Iran's Water Reservoir."

[32] The Manishtushu Obelisk is a four-sided diorite stele erected by the Akkadian King Sargon the Great's son as a legal record for the distribution of land in Kish.

[33] King Nebuchadnezzar was later defeated by the Assyrian King Ashur-resh-ishi I.

[34] Capital of the ancient Achaemenid Empire.

[35] Also translated as Khumma-Khaldash II.

[36] Ashur, or Assur, was the capital of Assyria.

[37] Also translated as Khumma-Khaldash III

[38] Ancient Assyrian, “Umman-manda” or “Madaya.”

[39] Other classical writers and historians also referred to events in this period, such as the Greek philosopher Strabo (c. 64 BCE-24 CE) who spent time in Asia Minor.

[40] Assyrian sources refer to a Sagbat/Sagbita, which may have been Ecbatana.

[41] The overarching Faravahar symbol of Zoroastrianism, or winged deity.

[42] The Elburz extended to the north of Media as well, hugging the Caspian (Khazar) Sea.

[43] Many ancient texts refer to a large plain of horses and clover—the Nisaean or Nesaean Plain.

[44] The Iranian Great Salt Desert, Dasht-e Kavir (lowlands), or Kavir-e Namak (salt plains), was a large, salty desert on the northern-central Iranian Plateau.

[45] With the likely throne name of “Kashtariti.”

[46] The last Assyrian ruler, Ashur-uballit II, disappeared from history in 609 BCE.

[47] The Nabonidus, Nabopolassar, or Gadd Chronicle.

[48] Iran-Turkey border

[49] The Circle of Ancient Iranian Studies, “Cyrus the Great, The Father & Liberator.”

[50] The Battle of the Persian Border is placed around 551 BCE, although Cambyses I is thought to have died upon Cyrus’ ascension to the throne in 559 BCE. The sources don’t correspond.

[51] The dates of the births and deaths of Persian kings are considerably debated.

[52] The text has been translated into the official languages of the United Nations, and its first four points mirror the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

[53] Arrian of Nicomedia was a Greek historian (c. 86-160 CE).

[54] Susa was under Cyrus’ rule by 538/9 BCE.

[55] By the Greek tragedian Aeschylus. It first premiered in 472 BCE.

[56] A eunuch and co-conspirator with Mentor of Rhodes who used cunning to enrich himself by aligning with the winning side.

[57] A Greek general who fought both for and against Persia.

[58] Descended from a long line of Greek satraps of the Persian Empire.

[59] Alexander’s first wife, Roxana, was the daughter of the warlord and Sogdian nobleman, Oxyartes of Bactria. Roxana was pregnant when Alexander died and gave birth to her husband’s heir, Alexander IV, after Alexander’s death. Alexander IV was assassinated as a teenager before he could take power of Macedonia.

[60] “Nicator” means “victorious/victor” or “unconquered.”

[61] A Diadochi who inherited Thrace, Asia Minor, and Macedonia in 306 BCE.

[62] The son of Antipater. Antipater was a contemporary of Alexander the Great and first inheritor of Macedonia as a Diadochi.

[63] Plutarch (c. 46-119 CE) was a Greco-Roman philosopher, writer, and priest and a strong critic of Herodotus.

[64] Which he only ruled for seventeen months before being conquered by the Gauls and dying in battle.

[65] In northern Syria, Seleucus created the “Seleucis of Syria” or the “Syrian Tetrapolis”—a collection of four cities named after his close family, which became the centers of four of his satrapies.

[66] Antioch became the “cradle of Christianity” and served a significant role in early Christianity as well as Hellenistic Judaism.

[67] Aria became part of the Parthian Empire in 167 BCE.

[68] One of three tribes of the Dahae (Parni, Xanthii, and Pissuri).

[69] This endorheic lake has all but dried up.

[70] The study of ancient coins, which was the best way to identify rulers of the time.

[71] Or Aspasine (r.c. 141-124 BCE), originally a satrap governor under the Seleucids.

[72] The modern-day Iranian province of Khūzestān.

[73] Marcus Licinius Crassus (115-53 BCE).

[74] Marcus Antonius (83-30 BCE).

[75] As part of the 700-year-long Roman-Persian Wars: 54 BCE-628 CE.

[76] Objects that serve as national emblems.

[77] 202 BCE-220 CE

[78] Possibly on a plain just off the northeastern Zagros Mountains.

[79] Byzantium’s citizens referred to themselves as being part of the Roman Empire or “Romania,” and the name “Byzantine” was attributed by historians much later. Byzantine had been one of the older names for Constantinople.

[80] The Catholic Church traces its origins back to the life of Jesus at the beginning of the Common Era.

[81] Near Carrhae in Turkey.

[82] Valerian began ruling Rome in 253 CE and persecuted Christians.

[83] Or Hormizd.

[84] Kavadh or Kaveh.

[85] In the interim, his brother, Zamasp (Zamaspes/Jamasp/Djamasp), ruled.

[86] Also known as Khosro, or Khosrau, with many other spellings.

[87] Justinian I (r. 527-565).

[88] Between 44,000 and 440,000 pieces.

[89] Heraclius I (r. 610-641).

[90] The “True Cross,” or fragments of the wooden cross on which Jesus the Christ was crucified.

[91] A large grouping of related nomadic ethnicities that originated in northeastern Asia and China and spread across Eastern Europe and Western and Central Asia.

[92] The concept of caliphates lasted until 1924 with the final dismantling of the Ottoman Caliphate (1517-1924 CE). The Rashidun Caliphate (632-661 CE) instigated the overtake of Persia. The Umayyad Caliphate (661-750 CE) followed the Rashidun, with the third caliphate being the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1517 CE).

[93] 170 Kilometers (106 miles) south of modern-day Baghdad.

[94] Sa’d ibn Abi Waqqas had a glittering religious and military career, although it was also marred with scandals and misdemeanors Shia Muslims may have instigated since Sa’d is heralded as a Sunni Muslim saint and considered one of “the ten to whom Paradise is promised” in Islam.

[95] The northeastern-most province of the Sasanian Empire adjacent to Transoxiana.

[96] Until the 15th century, most Iranians were Sunni Muslims who were later forced to convert to Shia Islam in the 16th century with the Safavid Empire of Iran.

[97] A bird of poetic legends and the modern-day Emblem of Uzbekistan (more in chapter thirteen: Religion and Myths).

[98] Although it is only the tomb of Darius I that is a certainty, and the others are assumed.

[99] A city built in the southern Zagros by Shapur I meaning “the beautiful city of Shapur,” largely by Roman POWs. The city includes several historical ruins and reliefs.

[100] The gate is mentioned in the biblical book of Esther, as well as by Herodotus.

[101] Kay Kawad, Kay Arash, Dara, Rustam/Rostam, and Arash the Archer.

[102] A maritime thalassocracy (maritime Empire) from the Levant, active from c. 2,500-64 BCE.

[103] Up to 70 kilometers (44 miles).

[104] The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization.

[105] The composite mortar of the yakhchal is a unique combination of sand, clay, egg whites, lime, goat hair, and ash, known as *sarooj* that is both heat and water-resistant.